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Allegiances

THUNDERCLAN

LEADER Morningstar - white calico tom with a large scar on top of flank

DEPUTY Flareheart - Small ginger she-cat with a distinctive blaze of orange wrapping around her neck

MEDICINE CAT Duckfeather - skinny black and white tom with grimy, messy fur

WARRIORS (toms, and she-cats without kits)

Cloudchaser - white tom with dark blue eyes

Tallwhisker - pale tabby tom with unusually long whiskers

Sparrowclaw - black tom with a dark gray tail, overcoat and face

Lavenderstripe - light brown she-cat with violet-gray stripes **APPRENTICE, Moonpaw**

Fallengaze - gold tom with white stripes and light green eyes **APPRENTICE, Daisypaw**

Raindapple - she-cat with a lovely dappled coat and blue eyes

Brighteyes - white she-cat with light gray markings and piercing yellow eyes

Gentleleaf - tortoiseshell she-cat

Owlpelt - brown she-cat with large, yellow eyes

Webfur - gray tom with large amber eyes

Ravenpelt - sleek black tom with grayish-blue eyes **APPRENTICE, Lightningpaw**

APPRENTICES (toms, and she-cats without kits)

Daisypaw - cream she-cat with green eyes

Lightningpaw - black tom with a white face, twin of Moonpaw

Moonpaw - black tom with a white face, twin of Lightningpaw

QUEENS (she-cats expecting or nursing kits)

Lilyflower - light brown she-cat with darker brown markings on tail, chest, face and legs (mother of Applekit - dark brown tom)

Sorrelbreeze - gorgeous she-cat with peachy fur and ginger stripes with white on her muzzle, ear tips, underside and toes (mother of Snakekit - silver tabby tom, Rabbitkit - brown tabby tom, and Hawkkit - dark brown tabby she-cat with thick fur and piercing forest green eyes)

ELDERS (former warriors and queens, now retired)

Cedarbelly - light brown tom with white on belly, oldest cat in Thunderclan

Hightail - gray tom with blue eyes and has an extremely long tail

Robinpelt - dark ginger tom with reddish markings, missing one ear and starting to go blind in both eyes

SHADOWCLAN

LEADER Inkstar - Inky black tom with dark eyes and an E-shaped scar on neck

DEPUTY Amberfeet - white she-cat with brown paws, ears, chin and tail tip

MEDICINE CAT Whitewater - white she-cat with amber eyes **APPRENTICE, Eaglepaw**

WARRIORS (toms, and she-cats without kits)

Wildthorn - black tom with white ears, tail and spots on flank **APPRENTICE, Berrypaw**

Brindlespots - beautiful dark tortoiseshell she-cat **APPRENTICE, Maplepaw**

Toadpelt - dark tabby tom **APPRENTICE, Dustpaw**

Pinestorm - small dark tabby tom with yellow eyes **APPRENTICE, Longpaw**

Sandfur - pale ginger she-cat with brown eyes

Raggedflame - skinny light brown tabby tom

Goldenclaw - golden tabby tom with amber eyes

APPRENTICES (toms, and she-cats without kits)

Berrypaw - tom with mangy reddish fur and yellow eyes

Maplepaw - tortoiseshell she-cat with a distinctive dappled coat

Dustpaw - gray tom with blue eyes

Longpaw - big tabby tom with an unusually long tooth

Eaglepaw - ginger tom

QUEENS (she-cats expecting or nursing kits)

Ferncloud - white she-cat with a silver underside and face (mother of Echokit - small, soft-furred silver-gray tabby she-cat with dark gray paws, a white chest, fluffy tail and deep green eyes, and Silentkit - a white she-cat with blue eyes)

Duskfur - black and gray spotted she-cat (mother of Sootkit, dark gray tom)

ELDERS (former warriors and queens, now retired)

Oaknose - dark brown tom with a brown nose

No-Ear - brown tom with both ears gone

WINDCLAN

LEADER Yellowstar - dark gray tom with golden eyes

DEPUTY Patchear - white tom with brown patches and amber eyes

MEDICINE CAT Larkmist -silver tabby she-cat with blue eyes

WARRIORS Raintail - brown tabby she-cat with green eyes and a ringed tail **APPRENTICE, Runningpaw**

Crowfall - black tom with green eyes **APPRENTICE, Brownpaw**

Leopardpelt - spotted brown tom

Cherrywind - dark brown she-cat

Weaselflight - light brown tom **APPRENTICE, Dapplepaw**

Barkfur - dark brown tom with white patches

Spottedfire - orange calico she-cat with yellow eyes

Goldenfeather - pale orange tom with speckles on back

Rabbitfur - fluffly white she-cat with black backfeet **APPRENTICE, Ashpaw**

APPRENTICES Brownpaw - plain brown tom

Runningpaw - small black and white tom

Ashpaw - gray she-cat with unusual green eyes

Dapplepaw - pretty tortoiseshell she-cat

QUEENS Sandrise - pale brown she-cat with ginger flecks (mother of Greenkit - thick tabby tom with unusual green eyes, and Wormkit - small skinny light tabby tom)

Brindlefur - pretty tabby (mother of Hollowkit - brown tabby tom, and Breezekit - white she-cat)

ELDERS Halfpelt - gray tom with half his pelt missing

Rowanpelt - reddish-brown she-cat, oldest cat in Windclan

Skunkstripe - black she-cat with a distinctive white stripe on her back

RIVERCLAN

LEADER Willowstar - pale tabby she-cat with white tail

DEPUTY Tideclaw - large dark brown tabby tom with violet-blue eyes

MEDICINE CAT Wavecrash - gray she-cat with a white overcoat **APPRENTICE, Swanpaw**

WARRIORS Swiftriver - black and white tom

Froststare - lilac tortoiseshell with pale blue eyes

Iceheart - light gray she-cat with a white chest **APPRENTICE, Minnowpaw**

Troutfur - speckled brown tom

Fallingsun - golden tabby tom with yellow eyes

Lakepelt - fluffy gray she-cat with a flat face

Darkstorm - sleek black and gray tabby tom **APPRENTICE, Sharkpaw**

Rockclaw - dark brown tabby tom with unusually thick claws

Eeltail - bracken colored tom with stripped tail

APPRENTICES Sharkpaw - long-haired solid gray tom

Minnowpaw - dark gray speckled she cat

Swanpaw - white she-cat with downy fur

QUEENS Ivyfang - nasty calico she-cat with blue eyes (mother of Pebblekit - silver tom)

Mossyfur - sleek smoky-black she-cat with amber eyes (mother of Stormkit - brown tabby tom and Shredkit - dark tabby with white ears)

Reedtail - brown she-cat with a reddish-brown tail

ELDERS Beetleclaw - brown tabby tom

Grasspelt - small pale silver she-cat

Fuzzyfoot - cream tom with large white paws

Prologue

[image]

A black and white tom stretched, yawning widely as he got up slowly. A huge forest was sprawled out in front of him, the treetops glistening in the light. The tom was confused at first with the strange surroundings, but then another cat approached him. The cat's pelt was a flaming ginger that glowed with a strange light and his bright, burning green eyes bore into him. Starry pawprints were left behind the handsome cat who touched noses with the tom. Suddenly, the scent of all four seasons washed over him: the tang of leaf-bare, the green scent of greenleaf, the musk of leaf-fall and the sweet blossom of newleaf. Realization hit the tom then. He was in Starclan.

"Duckfeather, it is good to see you," the ginger cat spoke.

F-Firestar! I didn't expect this! Why did you summon me?"

Firestar bowed his head, "I have an omen for you. Do make sure you remember it well." Duckfeather swallowed nervously and nodded. "A hawk's wind will cool the fire that rules the dark, or it will wreak havoc and destroy the light." The ginger tom flicked his tail and abruptly turned with the frost particles sparkling at his paws, leaving Duckfeather dumbfounded.

"W-wait! What does it mean? I don't understand!" Firestar only ignored him and disappeared into the trees. Duckfeather sighed, "I don't understand." The forest began to disperse, then completely vanished, leaving him in a world of darkness. He saw a shadow of cat with it's back hunched over in front of him. He couldn't make out who it was, but had a strange feeling of unease. On one side of the stranger, numerous cats were hissing and spitting, while on the other side more cats were returning the threats. The lone being in the center sat extremely still, almost like it was a statue.

Just then, a low voice spoke, "Which side will you choose? Where do you belong?"

Duckfeather gasped as he awoke, safe in his own nest again. He was panting heavily, recalling his vision as the prophecy swam in his mind, *a hawk's wind will cool the fire that rules the dark, or it will wreak havoc and destroy the light.*

Chapter 1

[image]

Hawkkit snuggled closer to her mom's belly, the warm scent of milk washing over her. She sighed happily but was quickly interrupted as her brother smacked her head. "Ow! Watch it mouse-brain!" She squeaked.

Her brother, Snakekit, rolled over and glared, "This is my spot!" He scuffed her ear and stuck out his tongue. Growling Hawkkit leaped for him, pushing him to the ground as they wrestled on the floor.

"Come on you two, cut it out. Not inside the nursery," Sorrelbreeze purred.

Hawkkit jumped back and spat out a clump of fur. She shot a spiteful look at Snakekit before apologizing, "Sorry, mom." Sorrelbreeze licked her ear affectionately. "Can we go outside and play now?"

Her mom sighed heavily in exasperation, "I suppose you won't stop pestering me if I said no, huh? Fine, but take Rabbitkit with you!" She called after them as they raced toward the entrance. Hawkkit groaned and trotted back towards her brother who was still sleeping. She prodded his side impatiently.

"Come on sleepy head! Let's go outside to play!" Rabbitkit blinked his eyes wearily. He yawned and got up, flexing his claws.

"Isn't it too early?"

"It's never too early," Hawkit retorted. "But you can sleep more if you like, doormouse."

Rabbitkit shook out his fur. "Hmpf. Let's go."

The trio bounded outside and Hawkkit blinked rapidly as the sudden brightness flooded her vision. The Clan was beginning to

stir. Morningstar was speaking softly with Brighteyes, Flareheart and Duckfeather. Webfur and Sparrowclaw were huddled by the fresh-kill pile, while Gentleleaf was sprawled out in the open. Then by the apprentice den, Lightningpaw and Moonpaw seemed to be practicing battle techniques on each other.

Hawkkit started to head over towards the two apprentices and quickly called behind her shoulder, "Come on guys! Let's learn some new battle moves!"

Lightningpaw looked up at the approaching kits. "Hey guys!"

"Hi! Can you teach us battle moves?" Hawkkit eagerly pawed the ground. *I want to become the best warrior ever!*

Moonpaw looked skeptical, his whiskers twitching. "I'm not sure you're ready yet," he meowed.

"Yes we are! Just look!" Rabbitkit swiped the air with his tail wrapped around his hind legs, but he became unbalanced and fell back.

Hawkkit and Snakekit laughed while the apprentices tried to still their whiskers, amusement lit in their eyes.

"Well I suppose we can try."

"Yea!" The kits gathered around the two toms, watching intensely.

"Pay close attention," Lightningpaw instructed. "I will be the attacker." Hawkkkit watched as Lightningpaw crouched down, his tail barely moving. As Moonpaw lunged forward he quickly turned onto his side and slipped under his brother's belly, raking it with sheathed claws, then swiftly turned back onto all fours out from under Moonpaw.

"Wow," she breathed, anxious to try the move.

"That was the half-turn belly rake. Just learned it too," Lightningpaw puffed out his chest.

"Let us try it now!" Snakekit spun around and faced Hawkkit,

crouching down with his tail lashing. Just as he was about to leap a paw stamped down his tail. "Ouch." Glancing up, Hawkkit saw Fallengaze staring down at them.

"Father!" She exclaimed excitedly. "Do you want to see us practice?"

He purred, "Don't you think you three are too young?"

Rabbitkit shook his head, his brown fur twitching. "Lightningpaw and Moonpaw just showed us the half-turn belly rake. It was so cool!"

"Did they now?" Fallengaze turned his gaze toward the apprentices who were shuffling their paws. "Don't you think it's a little early to teach these kits battle techniques?"

"Er, well they were bugging us and we thought that um..." Moonpaw stammered.

Hawkkit rolled her eyes, "Dad, come on."

"Sorry, but you have to wait until your six moons old." Fallengaze mewed sympathetically.

Snakekit and Rabbitkit moaned, "That'll take forever."

"Why don't you guys ask the elders to tell you a story instead? I'm sure Cedarbelly and Hightail would appreciate some company."

"I can't say the same for Robinpelt," muttered Lightningpaw. Fallengaze silenced him with a stern look and turned back to his kits.

"Go on now."

"Fine," the trio bounded towards the elder's den. The boughs of the beech tree upholding the den looked worn as they crept inside. The inside was reinforced with honeysuckle and had a welcoming scent. Cedarbelly looked up from his nest and smiled.

"What brings you three here?" he rasped.

"We want to hear a story!" Hawkkit demanded, her tabby pelt bushed out.

Hightail murmured, "Well I suppose we could tell you about the history of the clans."

Cedarbelly nodded, "The creation story is a great tale. Good pick Hightail."

"Don't expect me to join you fools." Robinpelt snorted and tucked his nose in his tail.

"I'm surprised he heard us," Snakekit whispered making Hawkkit giggle. The elder was going blind in both eyes, and was already half-deaf since his left ear was missing.

"Anyways, you all know that the Clans used to live in a forest far from here right?" The kits nodded. "Good. Well, many moons ago, that forest was a wilderness, untamed by territories. In the north lay sweeping moorland; in the south was a dense woodland. On the edge of the trees, a tumbling river flowed out of a dark ravine. Then one day, cats came into the forest. They were drawn by the soft rustlings of small creatures, shadows under the water and the sudden commotion of birds' wings in the trees. These were not warrior cats. They lived in small groups, not yet Clans. There were no borders set down. And they fought constantly, fearful that prey might run out and that their overlapping territories were being threatened. It was a lawless, bloody time for that forest, and many cats died."

Hawkkit shuddered, "that sounds so awful."

"It was," agreed Hightail.

"One night, when the moon was full, the cats agreed to meet at a clearing in the forest surrounded by four great oak trees. They argued over stolen prey. Claws flashed; challenging howls rang across the forest. A terrible battle followed, and soon the ground was wet with spilled blood."

Rabbitkit gasped.

Cedarbelly continued, his eyes gleaming. "Many cats died that night. Exhausted by their wounds, the survivors slept where they had fought. When they woke they were bathed in moonlight. All around them they saw the spirits of their slain kin, no longer torn and bloodied but shining like fallen stars."

"That sounds like Starclan!" Snakekit interrupted.

"Shh!" Rabbitkit and Hawkkit said in unison.

"They huddled on the ground, and, as the spirits spoke, they saw frightening visions of the future. They saw the forest drowned in blood, their kits stalked by death at every pawstep. And then they knew that the fighting had to end. 'Unite or die,' said the spirits. From among the living cats, a black female was the first to speak. She rose from the ground on stiff, battle-wearied legs. 'My name is Shadow,' she mewed. 'How should we unite, unless we have a leader? I can hunt in the depths of the darkest night. Let Shadow rule the forest!'"

Robinpelt growled, "Even at the very beginning ShadowClan was a pain in the tail. Always thinking they're the best."

"Shush now," Hightail scolded his denmate. "Let Cedarbelly finish."

"'And you would lead us into darkness too!' meowed a silvery gray tom with green eyes. 'I am River! I move through the forest along secret paths and hidden places. It is River, not Shadow, who should unite the forest!' But a wiry brown female growled, 'The forest is more than River and Shadow. Wind alone reaches its distant corners. I am as fast as the wind that blows from the high moors. *I* should be the leader.' The largest surviving cat was called Thunder. He was a fiery orange tom with amber eyes and large white paws. 'What good is any of that compared to my strength and skill at hunting? If any cat was born to rule, it is I.' A furious yowling broke out under the four great oaks, watched in silence by the spirit-cats. Dark clouds suddenly blew across the moon, and the living cats trembled in fear. On top of a high rock, they saw a tabby cat, one of the fallen, her fur glistening though there was no light in the sky. Her eyes flashed angrily at the cats on the ground."

"'You are all foolish as ducks!' she meowed. 'Can't you think beyond yourselves for one moment? Think of your kits!' The four cats - Shadow, River, Wind and Thunder - looked up at the tabby, but none of them spoke. 'The forest is big enough to feed all your families and many more,' she meowed. 'You must find other cats like you, choose a home in the forest, and set down borders.' At that moment the moon broke free of the clouds, revealing a circle of starlit spirit-cats around the edge of the clearing. A white tom stepped forward."

"'If you do this,' he said, 'we will reward you with eight more lives, so that you may lead you Clans for many moons to come." Next to speak was a slender tortoiseshell. She stepped forward and stood beside the white tom. 'We will watch over you from Silverpelt.' she promised, and lifted her eyes to the crowded path of stars that swept across the night sky. 'We will visit you in your dreams and guide you on your journeys.' The white tom spoke up again, 'once a month at the full moon, you will gather together here, between the four great oak trees, for a night of truce. You will see us above you in Silverpelt and know we are watching. And if blood is spilled on those nights, you will know we are angry.'"

"Whoa, is that how the gatherings began?" Snakekit asked. Hawkkit nudged him and glared. "Sorry, I'll be quiet." He stared at his paws in embarrassment.

Rabbitkit prompted, "Continue please."

"Anyways, the tabby yowled from the high rock, 'You will be warriors!'" Cedarbelly smiled. "Thunder, River, Wind and Shadow bowed their heads. 'From now on, you will live by a warrior code. Your hearts will be filled with courage and nobility, and if you must fight, it will not be for greed, but for honor and justice.' There was a long silence. Finally Thunder had nodded his broad orange head. 'This is wise advice. I believe we can choose our territories and lay down our borders fairly, in peace.' One by one, the other cats murmured their agreement. Then they returned to their homes and sought out cats like themselves, with similar strengths and abilities. River found cats willing to fish for their prey. Shadow gathered nighttime hunters with clever minds and sharp claws. To Wind came the fastest runners and cats who loved the open moors.

Thunder found hunters who could track prey through the thickest undergrowth. Then they divided the forest so each Clan had enough prey to survive, and all the cats could live in safety. And when the leaders returned to the four great oaks for the first night of the full-moon truce, their starry ancestors gave them eight more lives, as they had promised."

"There was not always peace between the Clans, but that was to be expected - cats are born with teeth and claws for a reason. Still, as long as they lived by the warrior code, their fallen ancestors would watch over them and guide them through their lives. And so the age of warrior Clans began."

"Wow! That's so cool!" Hawkkit said breathlessly.

Robinpelt growled, 'Now that you heard Cedarbelly ramble on can you leave us?" Hightail sighed and slowly shook his head.

"Ignore him kits. I think someone made dirt in his nest."

"Hmpf."

Just then, a yowl sounded, "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather here beneath the highledge for a clan meeting!"

"Oh great," Robinpelt got up and trudged outside followed by his denamtes.

"Come on, let's go watch." Hawkkit snuck out and raced towards a sprout of tall grass near the highledge.

"Hawkkit! We aren't old enough to catch prey! We shouldn't be watching," Rabbitkit hissed.

"Oh please, how would you know if you're old enough if you never even tried? We're already three moons old anyway. Don't be a scaredy-mouse!" she taunted and Snakekit snickered. Rabbitkit hesitated, but reluctantly followed and hid behind the grass with them. She saw Morningstar standing on the highledge, his gaze sweeping the clan.

"Yesterday a patrol caught the scent of fox straying across our

border. I want to warn every cat to be cautious in the forest and if you happen to come across the fox, do not engage alone. With that being said, Flareheart!" The deputy looked up. "Please organize today's patrols. Clan dismissed." Morningstar leaped down and padded inside his den, the bramble tendrils swishing as he pushed through them.

An idea popped inside her head, but she pushed it away for now.

"Well then, what do we have here?"

A mysterious voice spoke up behind them and Hawkkit whirled around to come face to face with none other than Duckfeather. The medicine cat glowered at them with narrow eyes and his matted, unkempt fur smelled rank from the herbs. She wrinkled her nose at the scent and tucked her tail between her legs. ThunderClan's medicine cat was the only thing that truly frightened her.

"What are you three doing?"

She gulped but thankfully Snakekit jumped in, "We were trying to catch a beetle that hid in this grass. But I think it got away now." She was surprised that he was challenging Duckfeather, most cats weren't brave enough. She frowned, if her brother could be brave then so could she.

"Yeah, it was a really big one too. I nearly had it," she bluffed, staring him in the eyes. She noticed his claws scraping the dirt and for a moment, was afraid he'd attack. But he turned away and stalked back to the medicine cat's den.

"Phew. That was a close one," Rabbitkit breathed a sigh of relief.

"Yeah, thanks for all the help," Snakekit rolled his eyes sarcastically.

"Well how about we play mossball now, seeing how everyone is going out on patrol." She suggested, breaking up the tension.

"That sounds like fun! I'll get the moss!" Rabbitkit raced off and she grinned. *One day, I know I'll be leader. I just have too! I will become the greatest warrior the clans have ever seen.*

Chapter 2

[image]

Night had fallen, sending the world into darkness. The stars shone brightly, illuminating the camp with a soft glow. Hawkkit woke her littermates and silently crept out of the nursery, leading the way. Outside, the chilly air clung to her fur like a burr. She shook out her pelt and looked around to see if anyone was still up. The only other cat she saw was Owlpelt, a brown she-cat who had large, yellow eyes, guarding the entrance.

As Snakekit and Rabbitkit slithered out she held her tail erect, signaling them to halt. She spotted the dirtplace and pointed her tail towards it. "Move quietly," she reminded them and sneaked around the nursery. Making sure Owlpelt was facing the other way, she pelted across the clearing and squeezed into the dirtplace. The thick odor of decaying meat, bones and even dropping filled her nose, making her glands swell. "Yuck," she stuck out her tongue and slid into the bushes.

After her siblings caught up, they maneuvered their way through the thick bracken and finally came across a small clearing. "I never realized the forest was this big!" Hawkkit pranced eagerly. "Okay, let's find this intruder."

Rabbitkit groaned, "Tell me why we're doing this again?"

"Because we can't allow a stray fox in our territory. Remember, this is our home." She stopped when a low growl rose through the crisp, leaf-fall air.

She froze and Snakekit whispered, "what was that?"

A pair of gleaming, amber eyes stared at them through a shrub, the growl becoming louder. Hawkkit flattened herself to the ground as a large fox stepped out, her ears pressed against her skull. The creature snarled at them, it's white teeth glinting from the pale moonlight. "Fox." She slowly backed away, her paws not making a

sound on the dry leaves. "Run!"

Hawkkit spun around and ran as fast as she could back to the camp, her paws skimming the ground. She felt hot breath on her flank from the fox and pushed even harder. As she saw familiar land marks whipping past realization hit her, she was leading the predator towards her unsuspecting Clanmates.

Gritting her teeth, she swerved to the left and ducked under a low branch, darting away. She could hear the surprised yelp from the fox and the skidding of its paws as it turned to pursue her. Her breath was coming in heavy gasps now and her lungs ached. She knew it was only a matter of time before the fox would be upon her. She could only hope that her littermates made it back to the camp safely and that a rescue party would be sent out to help her.

Suddenly, she tripped over a root jutting out of the dirt and landed awkwardly while twisting her paw from the impact. She let out a shriek of pain that shot up her from her leg and writhed on the ground. She twisted around as the fox abruptly stopped behind her. She saw triumph light up in its eyes as it neared her, its body trembling from the hunt. Hawkkit closed her eyes tightly, waiting for the snap of its jaws.

A hollar sounded, "Attack!" Pelts flashed by and landed on the fox's back. The predator yelped and bucked, trying to throw off its attackers. As Hawkkit stared in awe, she felt her scruff being grabbed and was floating in the air.

"I got you," a muffled voice said. *Fallengaze!* The warrior had scooped her up and was now running away from the fight, carrying her home. The cries from the warriors behind them faded into the forest, the only sounds remaining were the chittering from the anxious birds.

In the camp, the whole clan was awake, making guilt flood through Hawkkit. *I made everyone worried. What kind of warrior am I?*

She saw her mother pacing as they entered, and Sorrelbreeze's head shot up. "My baby!" she cried and raced towards them. Fallengaze gently laid her down, and Hawkkit winced as she put pressure on

her foot. "What's wrong? Are you hurt?" Sorrelbreeze anxiously nudged her, inspecting every inch of Hawkkit.

"Mom," she protested.

Sorrelbreeze gasped as she saw her paw. "What happened? Duckfeather get over here quickly! Hurry!" Hawkkit shrunk back as the medicine cat stalked over.

He sniffed her paw and grunted, "Broken. Easy fix though." Without looking up he said, "bring me comfrey, the bell-shaped flowers, and some poppyseeds." Hawkkit saw Tallwhisker walk away to grab the herbs. "Mouse-brained kits these days." Duckfeather rumbled, still inspecting her paw.

Sorrelbreeze licked Hawkkit's forehead, "Oh my poor kit. You'll be alright." Hawkkit shuddered as Tallwhisker returned and dropped the herbs.

Duckfeather spoke quietly, "keep still. You may feel a slight pain as I reset your bone, okay?"

Hawkkit didn't say anything, just watched nervously as he firmly grasped her paw and wrenched it back into place, making her scream in agony. Her paw was throbbing and she whimpered faintly. Hawkkit's head was beginning to spin as Duckfeather chewed the roots into poultice and applied it to her wound. "This will help the broken bone mend. Here are some poppyseeds too, make sure you eat all of them so they can help relieve your pain." He nudged them towards her with his nose, and she hastily lapped them up. The distinct flavor soaked her tongue, making her cringe.

"It's alright my darling. Go to sleep and get some rest, you had a long night." Sorrelbreeze stroked her spine with her tail. Hawkkit felt her eyelids grow heavy and she drifted into a deep slumber.

Morning light filtered through the tightly woven roots of the nursery, waking Hawkkit. She spread out in the moss nest, exposing her stomach. Her paw was still sore but she got up anyway. The nursery was silent apart from the snores of Lilyflower, the other

queen. She was the mother of Applekit, a moon old tom who had dark brown fur. Her mother and littermates were still asleep in their nest.

Hawkkit crept over her denmates' sleeping bodies and made a clumsy leap over the edge of the bed. She poked her head out of the small opening to the nursery and saw her Clanmates gathered around Flareheart, the rising sun throwing light on their pelts.

Ignoring them, she made her way to the fresh-kill pile where she found an old mouse at the bottom and tugged it out, staring down at it. Its jaw hung upon and beady, black eyes returned her stare blankly. *What am I doing? I never ate fresh-kill before! No, don't panic. You are a warrior and don't need milk anymore. If everyone else can eat it so can you.* The thought of never drinking her mother's milk anymore made her want cry, but she shook it off. Bending down, she tentatively took a tiny bite and slowly chewed. It was juicy and tender, and sang with the flavors of the forest. She hungrily gulped down the rest and licked her lips.

"Good to see you're up again, Hawkkit." A white she-cat with light gray markings stood before her.

"Brighteyes!" Brighteyes was the mate of their leader, Morningstar, and was also Daisypaw's mother.

She smiled warmly, "Did you just eat that mouse? Isn't it your first time?"

Hawkkit raised her chin and mewed proudly, "yup. It was fantastic!"

She purred, "Good to hear. Well I'm going to bring some food back to Morningstar so he doesn't get cranky." She winked and grabbed a shrew. "See you later!" Brighteyes trotted away towards the leader's den leaving Hawkkit alone again. She groomed herself swiftly and headed back towards the nursery. Applekit was pawing at a ball of moss and paused when she entered.

"Hi!" he squeaked, a goofy grin on his face. "How are you?"

"Fine, thanks. Can I join?" He nodded and the two batted the

mossball back and forth. Lilyflower yawned just then.

"You two are up early."

"Actually patrols already left." Hawkkit slapped the ball away, sending it flying over and hitting Snakekit's shoulder. He groggily looked up.

"Really?" Lilyflower stood up and squeezed outside. Applekit ran after her. Hawkkit exhaled and flicked her tail-tip in irritation. For several days she was cooped up in the nursery and was only able to escape when the others were sleeping. Everyone kept fussing over her and would say that she needed rest so her wound mended fully. She wished they would just stop pestering her.

"Aw. Is the wittle kit okay? Do you need anything? I sure hope your injury is alright," mocked Snakekit.

"Shut up." She clawed the packed earth and her pelt prickled in frustration. *I need to become a warrior as soon as possible! No matter what it takes.*

A moon had passed and leaf-bare was starting to make the clan grumpy. Owlpelt had recently moved into the nursery, expecting Ravenpelt's kits, making it more cramped. She couldn't wait to get out and move to the apprentices den. Hawkkit was sitting outside with Sorrelbreeze, Snakekit and Rabbitkit when Morningstar called out. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather here beneath the highledge."

"Another clan meeting? I wonder if Daisypaw will be made a warrior finally." Sorrelbreeze mumbled.

Morningstar looked at the cats seated below him until he spotted his daughter. "Daisypaw," he meowed proudly. Daisypaw leaped up onto the highledge next to her father and bowed her head respectfully. Fallengaze, her mentor, nodded approvingly. "I, Morningstar, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. She has trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend her to you as a warrior in her turn."

Morningstar gazed down at Daisypaw and Hawkkit felt a twinge of envy, wishing she was becoming a warrior. "Daisypaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do."

"Then by the powers of Starclan I give you your warrior name. Daisypaw, from this moment you will be known as Daisypelt. Starclan honors your strength and honesty, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan." Morningstar rested his chin on her head and she in turn licked his shoulder.

"Daisypelt! Daisypelt!" The clan cheered, their cries echoing in the hollow. Hawkkit joined in, imagining herself being up there and having her Clanmates shouting her name. The new warrior jumped down and was congratulated by the cats waiting for her. Hawkkit purred, happy for the she-cat. *That'll be me one day,* she thought. *Soon.*

Chapter 3

[image]

"Watch it!" Cloudchaser hissed at Hawkkit through the thin bird clamped in his mouth. She scurried out of the way to let the warrior pass, and watched as he dropped it on the fresh-kill pile. Hunting was poor thanks to leaf-bare blowing through the forest, and hungry bellies were constantly growling throughout the clan. Owlpelt had kitted and birthed two kits. Unfortunately, the one died almost instantly so there was only one left. The tiny black and white kit was constantly crying for food and Hawkkit had to listen to her pitiful mewls throughout the night. Lack of food and sleep has made her irritable, so she relieved her stress by picking on her littermates and even Applekit.

"Hawkkit!" Her brothers bounded over, Applekit on their heels.

"Guess what?" Rabbitkit huffed excitedly and didn't wait for a response, "Fuzzykit just opened her eyes!"

She sniffed, "that little runt is still alive? Let me see." She squeezed into the nursery, the entrance hugging her thighs making it hard to get through. She recalled when she used to dart in and out easily, now it was a struggle to even move around inside since there were several cats living in there.

The den was surprisingly warm, and she relished the heat. Looking dazed, the tiny she-cat was lying next to her mother while Owlpelt was grooming her, her eyes stretched wide open. She blinked as she saw Hawkkit enter and sneezed.

"Hey, Fuzzykit!" Applekit peeped while Hawkkit sniffed the runt. "Let us show you around and introduce you to everyone!"

The kit blinked again and spoke slowly, "Am I allowed too?"

"Why not?" Snakekit piped in and Hawkkit frowned. *Why was everyone so excited about a kit opening its eyes?*

"Would it be okay, mommy?" Fuzzykit glanced up innocently at her mother with pleading eyes. Owlpelt hesitated and considered the others. She sighed and smiled warmly.

"Well, I suppose it wouldn't hurt. Make sure you don't get under any cat's paw though, okay?" Owlpelt warned.

Fuzzykit nodded and tumbled out of the nest. Everyone chuckled except for Hawkkit who snorted in disbelief. *What a clumsy fool!* Without saying anything, she led the way and padded swiftly towards the apprentice's den. Moonpaw gaped at the advancing kits and meowed in shock, "Fuzzykit! You opened your eyes!" She cocked her head in confusion.

"That's Moonpaw, an apprentice. He has a brother named Lightningpaw who is also an apprentice," Rabbitkit informed her.

"What's an apprentice?"

"It's a cat six moons or older whose in training to become a warrior."

"What's a warrior?"

"A warrior is a cat who is a full member of the clan," Snakekit mewed proudly. "They protect the clan by fighting and hunting. They're the best!"

"Let's show her the warrior's den," Applekit started to run over to the branches of a beech tree where the den was located. Flareheart stepped out and collided with the kit.

"Oof. Sorry, Applekit. Didn't see you there." The deputy apologized but then noticed the others coming over. "Oh! Fuzzykit, you opened your eyes! Congratulation!" she purred.

"Who's that?" Fuzzykit asked.

"That's Flareheart, she's a warrior as well as the deputy of the clan. And before you bother asking, a deputy is the cat who's next in line for leader," Hawkkit explained in an uninterested tone.

"Who ruffled your fur?" Flareheart chortled as Hawkkit spiked out her coat in indignance.

"Let's move on," she growled. They walked to the elders den next, then the leader's den and lastly the medicine cat's den. The kits hesitated at the entrance. Fuzzykit watched them inquisitively.

"What's wrong?"

"Er, nothing." They ducked inside and were immediately overwhelmed with the powerful scent of herbs. Hawkkit gagged and was surprised when Fuzzykit strode right in with no problem, investigating curiously with her innocent eyes. *What's wrong with this kit?*

Duckfeather was uttering something to himself when he saw them. "What are you kits doing in here? Get out!" he spat.

"Sorry!" Hawkkit and the others ran back outside.

Applekit was trembling with fear, "that was scary." Fuzzykit was silent and just stared at her.

Hawkkit snarled, "what are you looking at, Dazedkit?"

She cocked her head, "Dazedkit?"

"Yeah. Morningstar should rename you to Dazedkit since you always have that stupid look on your face," she snapped.

"Hey, calm down Hawkkit. That wasn't very nice." Rabbitkit interrupted them. She flicked her tail and stormed away. *Idiots. Who cares about that freak?* She kicked a pebble and plopped down on her haunches. *I'll make sure everyone only has eyes for me, I'll be the greatest cat.* She narrowed her eyes at Fuzzykit. *That's right, the greatest. No one will stop me.*

"Hawkkit, step forward." She climbed up to the highledge, forcing herself to walk slowly even though she just wanted to charge up there. Morningstar gazed at her with gentle eyes and meowed, "Hawkkit, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your

warrior name, you shall be known as Hawkpaw. Your mentor will be Flareheart. I hope she will pass down all she knows on to you."

Hawkpaw dug her claws in the ground with exhilaration. *My mentor is the deputy!*

"Come up, Flareheart." The warrior padded forward and bowed. "You are ready to take on an apprentice again. You have received excellent training from Tallwhisker and you have shown yourself to be brave and strong. You will be the mentor of Hawkpaw, and I expect you to pass on all you know to her." Flareheart faced Hawkpaw and smiled. She touched noses with her and the Clan started calling out her new name.

"Hawkpaw! Hawkpaw! Hawkpaw!" She moved over to sit next to her brothers who had already gotten their names and mentors. After the cheering died down she made her way to her parents who were waiting for them.

Pride was lit up in their eyes and Sorrelbreeze bent down to lick their foreheads. "I'm so very proud of you three," she murmured. "You will be great apprentices." Hawkpaw purred and glanced at her father.

He nodded, "train hard. You will be magnificent." She dipped her head as her mentor strode over.

Flareheart bowed her head to her parents. "I will do my best to teach your daughter to the best of my ability."

All of a sudden, Lightningmask and Moonface pounced on her. The new warriors laughed, "Congrats! Too bad we won't be training together."

She giggled, "yeah. Thanks guys."

Daisypelt purred, "Congratulations. Being an apprentice is awesome." *This is so amazing!* Hawkpaw thought to herself. *I'm making my way to becoming a warrior!*

"Hey, Flareheart, can we go outside now?" she asked. Hawkpaw was eager to see the whole territory.

"Sure, I'll show you around. See if your brothers want to come."

"Of course we do!" Snakepaw grinned with Rabbitpaw behind him.

"Alright then, let's head out." She lead the way with Hawkpaw, Snakepaw and Rabbitpaw, along with their mentors Webfur and Cloudchaser. Hawkpaw felt needles poking her skin as she scrambled through the thorn tunnel. As she burst out, she gaped at the forest surrounding her. The crisp, white snow had smothered the woods. The snowfall sprinkled down from gray, clouded skies and floated down gently, spiraling down gracefully. The winter trees shivered from the bitter cold, their gnarled branches adorned with crystals glistening from the afternoon sun. Brilliant milky drifts sloped upward in soft curves against the dark trunks. She sneezed as a snowflake landed on her pink nose.

"Come on," Flareheart continued, pushing through the snow. "Right here is a network of tunnels connecting our territory with WindClan. We don't really use them anymore and we don't want anyone sneaking inside in case of cave-ins." Hawkpaw squinted to try and see inside, but the darkness was too thick. They trudged and stopped at the edge of a trail. "This is the Old Thunderpath," she mewed. "We haven't seen any monsters on it before and hope it remains that way."

"Cool," Snakepaw sniffed it and shook his head. "Twolegs are so strange."

"Let's keep going north," suggested Webfur. Flareheart bobbed her head and motioned for them to continue. Excitement prickled through Hawkpaw's pelt as she charged ahead, giggling from the sensation of cold on her paws. Eventually, they came across an aging structure of rotten wood.

"What is that?" whispered Rabbitpaw.

"That's the abandoned Twoleg Nest," Cloudchaser said. "It's usually rich in prey and herbs which aids us during leaf-bare." Hawkpaw grimaced, she couldn't imagine living in such a confined and suffocating nest like kittypets. They turned around and traveled to a mossy clearing dusted with snow, supposedly the area where

apprentices train. After struggling through knee-deep snow, they came across a large, naked oak tree. The branches hung low from the weight of ice and protruded outwards toward the sky. Hawkpaw stared in awe, her breath rising in visible puffs.

"This is called the Sky Oak. We don't use it for much, but it is a good vantage point. When you have your final test, you'll be expected to climb to the top." The large tree stood close to the shore of the lake, which had frozen over and gleamed silver. She observed the ice and saw herself peering back. She yelped in surprise and fell back.

"Haha!" Snakepaw rolled on his side laughing hysterically, while the warriors watched with twitching whiskers.

"S-shut up!" Hawkpaw licked her chest in embarrassment.

"Okay, well there's only one more place I want to show you guys. Why don't we wrap this up so we can go back and eat." Flareheart stifled a purr.

Hawkpaw grumbled under her breath, "thistles and thorns."

Rabbitpaw brushed his brown pelt against her, "It's okay." She heaved a heavy sigh and walked side-by-side with her brother. They stopped at another clearing near the ShadowClan border. The stench of ShadowClan filled Hawkpaw's nose and she wrinkled her nose.

Webfur meowed, "this is a site where twolegs camp during greenleaf. Make sure to avoid it during that time." She nodded and surveyed the large glade. The deciduous forest crammed around it, the sun making the ground sparkle. Hawkpaw froze as snarls broke the silence.

"Thundercats. What are you doing by our border?" A white she-cat with brown paws, ears, chin and tail-tip stepped out. She was closely followed by a huge golden tabby and a pale ginger she-cat.

"Amberfeet," Flareheat spoke calmly despite the tension sparking between the cats. "We were just showing our apprentices the

territory. We have no business with you."

The golden tabby growled threateningly, "Why should we trust you, squirrel-chasers?"

Hawkpaw jumped in, "You fox-hearts don't even know what trust is!" She bristled her fur to look intimidating and arched her back.

Flareheart glared at her, "Hawkpaw! This is not your place to speak!"

The other she-cat sniffed disdainfully, "It seems ThunderClan apprentices don't even know where their rank stands. Maybe we should teach them." She unsheathed her claws but Flareheart stepped between them.

"Now is not that time to fight. Let's not spill blood over a silly matter." Hawkpaw was about to protest but her mentor shoot her another look, silencing her.

Amberfeet meowed, "stand down Sandfur, Goldenclaw." The ShadowClan warriors sheathed their claws but still glared menacingly.

Flareheart dipped her head, "then we shall be leaving. Sorry for the disturbance." She waved her tail and the patrol slunk away. After they were out of earshot Hawkpaw couldn't stand it anymore.

"Why didn't we fight them! They were obviously asking for it, and we could have easily beaten them!"

Flareheart studied her apprentice carefully. "Why should we spill blood needlessly?"

"But they acted so arrogant. How can you let them talk like that?"

"A tabby doesn't change his stripes," she replied.

Hawkpaw opened her mouth to retort, but closed it realizing she wouldn't win the argument. She scowled as they finished up by checking the WindClan border.

"Can we go back now? I'm really hungry." Rabbitpaw scratched his ear.

"Of course." They padded back towards the stone hollow and slithered through the thorn entrance once more. Hawkpaw shook off the snow caught in her pelt and stalked over to the fresh-kill pile. She picked out a scrawny bird on the top and carried it to the Halfrock, a smooth low stone that rose out of the ground near the elders den. She ate furiously, barely chewing before swallowing chunks of meat. *I don't get it! S*he huffed. *Why didn't we fight those fleabags? They seemed too frail and feeble anyway. If I were in charge, I would have shredded their pelts. Flareheart's just to weak, but I'll be strong.*

Chapter 4

[image]

Hawkpaw felt raw and frigid, a chill running down her spine. She opened her eyes to a mysterious, shadowy forest that was densely packed together, darkness clutching it. The unfamiliar place was dull and vast, a starless sky hanging overhead. The trees were dark gray with rotting bark clinging to the sides, fungus sickly growing on them. They reached so high that she couldn't see anything above them, allowing no light to reach her. Even the air was damp and cold, so thick that she felt like she was swimming in water, fog swirling around her paws. The mist was breathing the thick, sticky, bare forest floor, not a single blade of grass cushioning her pads.

The echoing silence unnerved her, *where I am*? Hawkpaw pricked her ears at the sound of approaching paw steps. A sleek, dark gray-and-white tom appeared out of the gloom, his large and wide shoulders swaying. She was aware that she could see almost perfectly through him, the background visible beyond his pelt. He halted in front of Hawkpaw, his broad muzzle a mouselength from her nose, making her step back in fright. *Who is he? What does he want?*

"Welcome to Starclan." He spoke in a gruff voice, his long, yellow fangs showing. The tom had sharp amber eyes that stood out on his white face, his shoulder blades white as were his paws. The tom eyed Hawkpaw curiously - like a hunter assessing prey. "I am Thistleclaw. I have been watching you for many moons, Hawkpaw."

Confusion racked her brain, unsure of what was happening and if she should trust this cat. *How does he know my name? I never met him before so it isn't possible. Although, he did say I'm in Starclan. But wait, I'm not dead!*

"Come with me," Thistleclaw meowed and trotted away back into the forest. Hawkpaw hesitated but scurried after him in the end, her ears twitching nervously while she followed him. He led her to a sluggish river, its waters shady and lifeless with no stepping stones

or fallen trees to be used to cross it. When she stepped on the bank, the mud squelched and tried to suck her paw in, making her shriek in surprise. Thistleclaw purred in amusement and brushed against her, "I have been waiting for you, Hawkpaw. You are destined for many great things, and I want to help you."

"Destined for great things?" Hawkpaw repeated.

"Yes. One day, you could potentially become the leader of ThunderClan. In fact, leader of all the Clans. You just need to follow me and impressive power will be at your paw-tips. Do you understand?" She nodded vigorously, excitement flaring in her stomach. *Leader!*

"But why me? What makes me so special?"

He grinned, "because you are strong. I can see that you have immense strength inside you, enough to make you the greatest warrior the Clans have *ever* seen. What do you say?"

"Yes! I would love that!"

Thistleclaw chuckled, "you have enthusiasm, I like that, you can use it to your advantage. Just promise me one thing, you will remain loyal to only your Clan and fight to protect it no matter the cost." Hawkpaw nodded. "Good. Your training will start from tomorrow night on. Be prepared, I'll make you the strongest warrior ever." Thistleclaw's large figure started to fade away and Hawkpaw found herself in her nest once more. She shivered from the leaf-bare wind and curled tighter into a ball, tucking her tail around her body. She smiled to herself before drifting off to sleep again, *I'm going to be the greatest warrior!*

"Wake up! It's time for dawn patrol." Hawkpaw felt a paw brush her cheek. She wearily looked up to see Snakepaw eagerly fidgeting. "Let's go, everyone's waiting for you." She groggily sat up and walked outside. Dew soaked her paws. The sun was just rising over the distant horizon, the rays spilling over the stone hollow setting the rocks ablaze, the earth still glistening with frost. She saw Flareheart, Webfur and Snakepaw waiting by the entrance.

Webfur snorted as she walked over, "I didn't think a cat could sleep so much."

Hawkpaw's fur bristled, "it's only dawn!"

"Hawkpaw." Her mentor's warning stopped her from continuing. "Webfur, why don't you lead the patrol instead?"

"You sure?"

"Yup, I want to hang back with my apprentice," she mewed. Webfur shrugged and led the group outside. Flareheart whispered, "Ignore him, he doesn't mean to be grouchy, he's just not a dawn cat." Hawkpaw sighed and picked up her pace. They padded quietly for the rest of the time, ducking through bracken and overgrowth. The snow numbed her pads as they neared the ShadowClan border. The tall pines whispered at the cats, their branches snaking upward and covering the pale sky. They seemed ominously quiet, the only sound were the needles hustled in the breeze and their own footfalls that grew silent when they reached the scent line.

"Alright, Snakepaw and I will start to reset the markers here, you two can go ahead awhile." Webfur brusquely turned and began to mark the border.

"Let's go." Flareheart pushed through the trees and beckoned Hawkpaw with her tail. Hawkpaw sniffed a clump of bracken and sprayed it. After several minutes, she grew restless and began to lazily spray clumps. Hawkpaw wearily watched Flareheart as she investigated a scent that crossed the boundary. *This is boring.* She let out a breath. *At this rate we'll be marking borders till moonhigh.*

"Did you guys finish yet?" Webfur and Snakepaw bounded towards them.

Flareheart shook her head, "A little more left if you'd like to help. Did you find anything odd?"

"No, though I did detect stray ShadowClan scents a few taillengths across our border, but I think it was just the wind." Suspicion flashed in Flareheart's eyes but she nodded anyways.

"Can we keep moving?" Hawkpaw interrupted. Her claws itched. All she wanted to do was practice battle moves. If only they could find a rogue or predator - something she could fight.

"This is stupid," Snakepaw muttered.

"So are you," Hawkpaw joked. Snakepaw grunted and launched a play swipe at her muzzle, but she ducked and batted his chest.

"Knock it off you two! We're patrolling the border," Webfur reminded them sternly. "You're not in the nursery anymore, so don't act like kits."

Hawkpaw frowned and stomped away. She continued spraying halfheartedly, gazing wistfully at the sky. Was Thistleclaw watching? What was her training going to be like?

In the distance, a bird chirped, its shrill voice tempting her. Maybe she could quick sneak away to hunt without being noticed. Hawkpaw peeked at her mentor. Flareheart was busily spraying, as was Webfur. Snakepaw was flicking his feet with every pawstep, irritation clear on his face. *At least I'm not the only one annoyed,* she thought.

Hawkpaw slunk into the woods. She paused and tasted the air. *Nothing.* She kept wandering until mouse-scent bathed her tongue. A small mouse was nibbling on a seed, not even paying attention to its surroundings. Hawkpaw crouched until her belly touched the snow, her tail swishing behind her. She started creeping forward when her paw accidentally crunched the snow, making the critter look up. It saw her and fled quickly. She cursed under her breath.

"What are you doing?" Hawkpaw spun around and saw Flareheart staring quizzically.

"Just hunting," she lifted her chin.

"Oh, really? I'm not sure I would call that hunting. Your posture was all wrong."

"Huh?"

"First off, your tail was all over the place. You must keep it still so it doesn't disturb leaves or anything that would give away your position. Your crouch was okay, but you have to be light on your feet. A mouse will feel the vibrations in the ground before they see or hear you. Try again." Hawkpaw crouched again, forcing her tail to remain still while she crept forward quietly, barely making a sound. "Very good," she purred. "You learn quickly."

Hawkpaw glowed with joy.

"We can practice more this afternoon, but let's head back for now."

"Okay!" At camp, Hawkpaw scurried over to her mom and dad who were sharing a vole. "Guess what? I just learned my hunting crouch, look!" She got low and demonstrated her new move.

"Very nice," Sorrelbreeze purred and Fallengaze smiled with delight.

"I'm going to show Rabbitpaw and Snakepaw!" As she was racing towards her brothers, she suddenly tripped on something and got a mouthful of snow. She spat it out and shook her head, clearing her ears. She glared behind her to see Fuzzykit sitting up and sneezing. "Watch it, Dazedkit." Hawkpaw stalked away, leaving the kit sniffling. She managed to find her littermates and showed them her move.

"Let me try!" Snakepaw squatted down and edged forward, his tail-tip flicking.

"Not bad," she sniffed.

"How's this?" Rabbitpaw asked. He was low to the floor and his tail didn't move a whisker, his whole body moving silently.

"Pretty good actually." She was taken aback. He was better than she expected him to be. It didn't matter though, she was still going to be the best.

"Thistleclaw! Where are you?" Hawkpaw ran through the forest, squeezing past trees and finally reached the river. The water gurgled and lurched with the current, yet there was no StarClan cat waiting for her.

"Hey there, little one." The eerie voice spoke and Thistleclaw appeared before her. "Are you ready for your training to begin?"

"Yes! And guess what, I learned my hunting crouch." She showed him, making sure she did everything perfectly, but he only grunted.

"Don't get cocky. That doesn't help with much, you need to learn how to fight." Hawkpaw swallowed as he continued, "now let's start. Do you know any moves yet?"

"Um, I've learned the half-turn belly rake once," she remembered Lightningmask and Moonface showing it to her when she was a kit.

He nodded, "okay. Show me."

Hawkpaw turned on her side and slipped under an imaginary enemy clumsily. She raked the air with her claws and sluggishly turned back on all fours. "How was that?"

"Terrible. You could be dead. You were way too slow and unbalanced, the enemy could have easily blocked you and brought you down. Try again, but this time make sure you are more quick when sliding and hopping up. Also, try to be more fluid." She did the move again, keeping in mind what Thistleclaw said.

"Not bad," he meowed. "Again." For the rest of the night she practiced the same move until she perfected it, her breath coming in short pants.

"Now, try it on me," Thistleclaw ordered.

Hawkpaw blinked in surprise, "are you sure?"

"Yes, now hurry up. We don't have much time left. Don't be afraid to use your claws."

"B-but, I could hurt you!"

"Oh please, I'm already dead. Just go!" Hawkpaw eyed him, her fur quivering. She slid on her side and tried to get underneath his belly, but he slammed his hefty paws down on her chest. She gasped and coughed, aching pain in her upper body. "Hmm, you need to be

ready for anything. You can do the half-turn belly rake fine, but the enemy will be fighting back. They won't be sitting still for you, remember that." Hawkpaw shakily got up.

"Ye-yes sir."

Thistleclaw licked his paw thoughtfully. "We'll work on this more tomorrow night. See you then." Hawkpaw woke up in the apprentices den, her chest still throbbing. She groaned and rolled over. *Get over it!* she scolded herself. *If you want to become strong, you need to endure this. It's only temporary. Thistleclaw is helping you, but he doesn't have to. StarClan wants you to become the leader of ThunderClan and unite the Clans, so you must go on! Don't let them down.*

Chapter 5

[image]

Snow smothered the forest, but the sheltered camp held the promise of newleaf from the green tinging the grass. Hawkpaw was grooming herself when Applekit raced over. "Hey, Applekit," she purred. "How have you been doing?"

"Great!" he squeaked. "I only have one more moon until I become an apprentice like you!"

"I can't believe it. I'll be looking forward to you moving in with us." She smiled and looked up as Fallengaze padded towards her. "Hi," she greeted him.

"I was wondering if you wanted to hunt with me, just the two of us." She shrugged.

"Why not? I haven't actually caught anything yet though."

His tail rippled, "that's fine. I can help."

"Okay. Bye, Applekit." She strolled through the forest with her father, tasting the air every few steps.

"So, do you like being an apprentice so far?"

"Yeah, it's great! I can't wait to become a warrior though."

"I would think," he purred. "Have you learned anything yet?"

"I know how to do the half-turn belly rake," she smirked.

"Ah, I remember you telling me about that." Fallengaze paused and sniffed the sky, his nose twitching. "Do you smell that?" he mewed. Hawkpaw sniffed and smelled rabbit on the breeze.

"Yeah, near the WindClan border."

Fallengaze nodded, "very good. Let's go." They found a large rabbit grazing on shoots of grass. Fallengaze whispered to her, "we'll stalk it from both sides, I'll go right and chase it towards you when you're ready." His gaze never left the prey. "Make sure to stay downwind though, we need to move in without alarming it."

Hawkpaw flicked her ear in agreement and headed left, moving quietly. She squared herself with the unaware rabbit, keeping low and stilling her tail. She saw her father crouch, wiggling his haunches while waiting for her command. She waved her tail and he leaped towards the rabbit, startling it and chasing it right towards her. She caught the rabbit with her claws and gave it a quick bite to the neck, finishing it off. She quickly thanked StarClan for its life and looked up, her father was gazing warmly at her.

"Great job!" he meowed. "You caught your first fresh-kill." Hawkpaw licked the blood off her lips and felt pleasure from the warm tang.

"Thanks, but you assisted. It wasn't just me."

"Well, you did all the work, I just drove it to you. You could have caught it on your own." Hawkpaw purred from her father's praise. "Why don't you bring it back to camp and give it the elders? I'm sure they would enjoy a juicy rabbit."

"Okay," she bent down and picked it up, it's legs dragging as she trotted away. At ThunderClan's bivouac, her Clanmates greeted her right away, admiration in their mews. She puffed out her chest proudly and carried it towards to the elder's den. Cedarbelly, Hightail and Robinpelt peeked up from their nests and gaped. Hawkpaw dropped the rabbit at their paws and lifted her chin.

Hightail was the first to speak, "Wow! What a catch during leaf-bare!"

"Amazing, thank you youngster." Cedarbelly commended her and took a hungry bite.

"A reasonable kill for an apprentice," rasped Robinpelt as he bent down to eat with his denmates. Hawkpaw scowled to herself and left the elders to their meal, sauntering outside. She saw

Cloudchaser lying next to Daisypelt as he groomed her, his tail twined with her's. She guessed that by newleaf Daisypelt would move to the nursery expecting his kits. Although they haven't officially announced they were mates, it was pretty obvious from their behavior. Hawkpaw saw Morningstar murmuring something to his mate, his eyes watching his daughter.

Hawkpaw stretched and decided to share-tongues with Rabbitpaw who was napping on the Halfrock. She sneaked up on him, leaping out from behind a bush and tackled him. "Ah!" he yelled as she playfully nipped his tail. He sprang up and swiped her ears. Laughing they rolled on the ground, flurries of snow exploding around them. They finally stopped as Hawkpaw shoved him down and placed her paw on him, winning the mock battle.

Rabbitpaw cracked up as she shook her thick, tabby pelt out, spraying him with snow. She hopped back as he stood up. "What was that for?"

"Just practicing my battle moves," she meowed. "Wanna share-tongues? It's already sunhigh."

"Sure," he sat next to her and they groomed each other. She relaxed and yawned, sleepiness sweeping over her. *I hope I can skip training tonight, I'm really tired. I'm sure Thistleclaw wouldn't mind*. "Are you ready for tonight?"

"Tonight?" she repeated lost in her thoughts.

"The Gathering silly. Remember?"

"The Gathering! I completely forgot tonight's a full moon." She began quivering with anticipation, this would be her first visit to the Island, her first meeting with the other Clans. She wondered what it would be like, would she be introduced to everyone? Energy surged through her and her paws fizzed with delight. She couldn't wait!

"I'm worried about ShadowClan." Hawkpaw pricked her ears. Was something wrong with their neighbor?

Morningstar and Flareheart were gossiping softly, but close enough for Hawkpaw to hear. "Their scent keeps drifting over our border, but only a few rabbitlengths, not enough to call it a threat."

Morningstar meowed, "We'll have to keep an eye on them. I want you to watch them tonight, see if you can catch snippets of their conversation that could tell us anything." Flareheart dipped her head as he continued, "I'd hate to think they're planning an attack tonight when we leave for the Gathering, but leave behind some extra cats just in case."

Flareheart got up and fixed her stare at Hawkpaw who quickly ducked her head and shifted her paws uncomfortably, afraid she was caught eavesdropping. The deputy climbed up the Highledge and called out, "I want the following cats to come to the Gathering. The rest will remain at camp. Cloudchaser, Daisypelt, Lightningmask and Gentleleaf. Cedarbelly, Robinpelt, Hawkpaw, Rabbitpaw and Snakepaw. Tallwhisker will be in charge until we return." Tallwhisker awaited her as she made her way to him. She whispered something in his ear and he gave a solemn nod, his eyes narrowed. The full moon turned the pelts of the cats waiting to leave for the Gathering silver. Snakepaw plucked the grass while Rabbitpaw turned nervous circles. Gentleleaf was gazing wistfully at the stars next to Daisypelt and Cloudchaser.

Morningstar padded towards the camp entrance, "let's go." With a flick of his tail the cats headed out. Hawkpaw saw Applekit poke his head out of the nursery, and quickly disappeared back inside. Duckfeather and Flareheart plodded next to Morningstar, their paces evenly matched. They got to the lake and walked along its edge three taillengths away.

Lightningmask galloped behind her and matched his pace with her's. "Hey," he mewed. "Are you excited?"

"Of course! I can't believe I'm actually going." Lightningmask chuckled and pointed his tail at a fallen tree that laid across the lake from the mainland to the island. "We use that as a bridge to reach the island for Gatherings," he told her. "It comes in handy so we don't have to swim."

Hawkpaw shuddered at the thought of paddling in the icy water. How could RiverClan actually *want* to swim? Morningstar halted by the roots of the fallen tree and let Flareheart cross first, followed by Duckfeather. Everyone crossed until it was only Lightningmask and Hawkpaw standing next to Morningstar. The leader nudged Hawkpaw forward. She clambered up and grasped it tightly with her claws to keep from slipping on the wet bark. She edged forward and felt Lightningmask's breath on her flank. "Keep going, you're almost there," he encouraged her. She felt more sure with every pawstep and was more than halfway when all of a sudden, her foot slid sideways and she tumbled over into the freezing water below. She plunged headfirst into the water and the sudden impact knocked the wind from her lungs, the current tugged on her thick fur, dragging her down. She desperately churned her paws, trying to swim up but the stream tugged her down again. Her lungs were screaming for air furiously now, but she was to weakened to do anything anymore. The faint sound of a splash echoed yet her vision was too blurred for her to distinguish the shape coming towards her. *StarClan? Is that you?*

Teeth grabbed her scruff and the mysterious cat swam against the tide, breaking the surface. They hauled her onto shore and laid her down gently. "Hawkpaw? Hawkpaw?" Anxious mews surrounded her and she vomited water, her stomach convulsing. She was still coughing as she opened her eyes slowly to see a drenched Lightningmask hovering above her, worry flashing in his blue eyes.

"You look like a drowned rat," she teased. Relief flooded in the young warrior and he licked her ear.

"I was so scared that you got hurt," he murmured. "Don't ever do that again." Hawkpaw got up on shaky legs and realized she was on the island. The shore was rocky with some thorns rooted in them, stones of different shades of gray decorating it. She saw that it changed into a miniature forest further up made of dense, bare bushes and trees around the edge.

Duckfeather shouldered his way through the crowed and peered down at her, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine now. Thanks for rescuing me, Lightningmask."

The black tom licked his chest in embarrassment, "no problem." Morningstar led the way into the center of the island, where an open patch of grass with a giant oak greeted them.

"We're the first ones here!" exclaimed Daisypelt. She circled Cloudchaser who was purring loudly with amusement.

Flareheart meowed while pointing her tail at the large tree, "the leaders address the Clans on the low-growing branches of that oak tree."

"Cool," Hawkpaw stiffened as she felt the ground tremble. "What's going on?"

"Relax, another Clan is coming." A bunch of cats streamed into the clearing, their thin coats of wiry hair telling her it was WindClan. In the lead an old, dark gray tom with golden eyes dipped his head politely at Morningstar.

"Is that Yellowstar?" she asked.

"Yes. He has been leading WindClan for many moons and is on his second life. Then that white tom with brown patches over there is Patchear, the deputy." Hawkpaw nodded, soaking in the new information. She would be sure to remember as much as possible about her enemies. *Or are they friends since I'll lead them some day?*

"Skunkstripe! Halfpelt! Good to see you." Cedarbelly's meow interrupted her thoughts. She looked over to see a black she-cat and gray tom pad over to the elder. She trembled, feeling queasy at the sight of the tom. Half of his body was missing fur and completely covered in scars and wrinkled, pink skin.

Flareheart noticed her expression and soothed her, "it's alright, don't be afraid."

"What happened to him?" The cat was rubbing his face with Cedarbelly.

"Halfpelt was once trapped in a fire that burned him severely. Ever since the incident, only half of his pelt remained. He's a really nice cat though, just make sure you don't look so disgusted around him

because he get's easily offended."

"That goes for every WindClan cat," scoffed Lightningmask. Flareheart stifled a laugh. Just then, the sound of thrumming pawsteps drew Hawkpaw's attention. Thick pelts swarmed around the edge and dove into the clearing.

"RiverClan is here on time for once."

A pale tabby, young she-cat with a white tail greeted the two leaders. Hawkpaw reckoned she was Willowstar.

"That there is Willowstar, leader of RiverClan. She just received her nine lives ten moons ago," Flareheart meowed confirming her guess. "The deputy is Tideclaw," she nodded towards a bulky, dark brown tom with black stripes. His tabby pelt glistened in the moonlight and she could see his muscles rippling underneath. "He's rather short-tempered and a great fighter." Tideclaw saw them staring and glared.

Hawkpaw quickly looked away, "I hope I don't have to face him in battle." She saw Duckfeather stalk towards a silver tabby she-cat who was chatting with a gray she-cat with a white overcoat. They looked up at him and smiled.

"Hello, Duckfeather!" the silver tabby chirped.

Duckfeather dipped his head, "Larkmist. How's WindClan doing?"

"Fine, fine. Cherrywind got scratched by a dog a quarter-moon ago, but it healed quickly."

"Good to hear. And how is your Clan, Wavecrash?"

"Good, even with leaf-bare I have a swelling stock of herbs."

"Where's your apprentice?" Duckfeather asked when a tiny white she-cat darted over. "Oh, nevermind. Greetings, Swanpaw." Hawkpaw swallowed back a twinge of jealousy at the gorgeous she-cat. Swanpaw had silky fur that shone beautifully in the light, her thick coat seeming downy like a swan's feathers.

"Someone's coming!" called a voice behind her.

Lightningmask tasted the air. "It's ShadowClan." There was an edge is his mew.

As he spoke, dark shapes slunk between the trees and slithered down like snakes, silent as shadows. The undergrowth barely made a sound as they weaved through it. Hawkpaw's pelt prickled. These cats hardly rippled a snowflake let alone the shrubs.

A white she-cat marched towards the group of medicine cats, her amber eyes glinting while a ginger tom followed suit, his eyes darting back and forth nervously.

"Hey, Duckfeather! Have you killed anyone recently, you old herb-muddler?" she joked. Duckfeather purred in response. *How can he act so calm knowing ShadowClan is probably up to no good?* she wondered.

Meanwhile, an inky black tom with dark eyes acknowledged Morningstar, and she noticed he had an E-shaped scar on the side of his neck. "Greetings, Morningstar."

"It's good to see you again, Inkstar." Morningstar responded politely yet Hawkpaw could detect some irritation in his voice.

"Since everyone's here, let's start." Willowstar leapt onto the lower branches of the oak tree followed by the other leaders and yowled above the chatter, "Let the Gathering begin!" The cats quieted down and Hawkpaw found herself squished between Lightningmask and a ShadowClan warrior. She pressed closer to Lightningmask, and she felt his fur ripple in surprise.

"Sorry," she whispered.

"It's fine." The jumble of scents were confusing her and she tried not to breathe too deeply, her ears flattened. "You'll get used to it," he promised and wrapped his tail around her comfortingly. She nodded and watched as Willowstar stepped forward.

"Leaf-bare has frozen our rivers, but the lake is still plentiful in fish. Twolegs have been staying away, giving us peace and quiet for

once." Murmurs of merriment rose from the crowd of cats.

"Do Twolegs live with RiverClan?" asked Hawkpaw.

'Not exactly. There is a Greenleaf Twolegplace they visit during greenleaf so they can swim there."

Gentleleaf turned around, "Shh!"

"We have a new apprentice, Pebblepaw!" The Clan cats started cheering, and she saw a silver tomcat straighten up.

Morningstar moved forward next, "ThunderClan is well, leaf-bare hasn't affected us too much. Owlpelt has had a kit and we have three new apprentices." His gaze searched the crowd until he spotted Hawkpaw and her littermates. "Hawkpaw, Snakepaw and Rabbitpaw!"

"Hawkpaw! Snakepaw! Rabbitpaw!" the Clans chanted and she raised her head, glowing with pride. Lightningmask was screaming in her ear and she stifled a purr. After the calling died down, Morningstar stepped back, letting Yellowstar speak.

"WindClan is also doing well. We have a new warrior, Dappleflight!" A pretty tortoiseshell ducked her head in embarrassment as cats chanted her name. Yellowstar continued, his gaze dark, "some stray dogs have been stirring up trouble on the moor, but our warriors have chased them off." Triumphant yowls rang throughout the clearing from WindClan.

Lightningmask leaned closer to Hawkpaw, "I would have shredded those dogs into mousedust."

"Yeah, when hedgehogs fly."

"Hush," Gentleleaf hissed. Lightningmask sniffed and turned his gaze back to the great oak.

Inkstar was the last to address the cats. "ShadowClan is fine. We have two new warriors - Berrypelt and Longtooth!" A tomcat with mangy reddish fur puffed out his chest and his fellow Clanmate stood still, an unusually long tooth jutting out of the side of his

mouth as he glared evenly at the cats around him.

"That tabby seems like a fun guy, especially with that fang he's got. I wonder how he manages to groom himself without being stabbed." Hawkpaw giggled but was silenced again by Gentleleaf. Inkstar hopped down and the cats stood up and began moving around, breaking up into separate groups. Her whiskers were brushing pelts as cats weaved past.

"You two need to learn manners, you shouldn't be blathering on when the leaders are talking. I would think that at least *you* would understand that, Lightningmask. Maybe you should be sent back to the apprentice's den," Gentleleaf growled.

"Sorry, sorry," he muttered and rolled his eyes at Hawkpaw when she strode away. "Great Starclan she's in a huffy mood! Anyways, let me show you to some apprentices so you can get to know them."

Hawkpaw followed him to a cluster of young cats. "Hey guys!" he meowed. Hawkpaw recognized Pebblepaw, the new RiverClan apprentice, among the cats. A gray she-cat greeted them, her unusual green eyes sparkling.

"Hello, Lightningpaw."

"It's Lightningmask now, I'm a warrior!" he boasted.

"Congratulations," she purred. "I'm supposing mask refers to your face?" The tom was nearly all black, apart from the white spot covering face.

"Yeah. Thank you, Ashpaw. Let me introduce my friend Hawkpaw, she just became an apprentice a moon ago." He nudged her towards Ashpaw who was studying her. She sniffed disdainfully, her tail twitching in irritation.

"Hi," she meowed coldly. Hawkpaw was taken aback, the gray cat had a whole different tone now.

"Well, I'm going to go now, have fun!" Lightningmask called over his shoulder.

"Bye!" Ashpaw stared after the warrior, her eyes misty and wistful. *Don't tell me she's got a crush on Lightningmask! Isn't that forbidden? Wait, does she think we're together and that's why she acts cold to me?*

A small black-and-white tom popped out just then and began chatting happily, "Hi, I'm Runningpaw from WindClan, it's nice to meet you! You have such cool eyes, their a pretty green. What's ThunderClan like? How can you live under trees all day without space to run? Don't you feel cramped, cause I sure would. How old are you? Do you have siblings? Ashpaw is my sister and..."

Hawkpaw didn't know how to respond to all the questions flowing out of his mouth, but thankfully Ashpaw slapped Runningpaw and growled, "Shut up. Sorry about him, he's the fastest runner in WindClan *and* the fastest talker. He never stops." Hawkpaw held back a laugh.

"It's okay. Nice to meet you too." Runningpaw beamed but was quickly shoved aside by another she-cat. She was a dark tortoiseshell with a very distinctive dappled coat.

"I'm Maplepaw, greatest cat in ShadowClan," she bragged.

"Er, hello. I'm..."

"Hawkpaw, I know. I know all my enemies." She narrowed her eyes to slits and Hawkpaw gulped.

Pebblepaw stepped up then, "calm down, Maplepaw."

"Silence. You're also new so don't bother trying to boss me around," she snarled.

"Maplepaw, don't stir up trouble at the Gathering. You know the truce," a she-cat warned.

"Forgive me, Brindlespots." Maplepaw dipped her head down low, not looking up.

Brindlespot's gaze darkened but she meowed, "we're leaving now, come on." She slunk away with Maplepaw at her heels.

"Ignore her, she always thinks she's better than everyone and was born with a burr in her pelt," Pebblepaw mewed and Hawkpaw purred.

"ThunderClan, let's go back home! It's getting late." Morningstar's yowl snapped her attention back.

"Oh, I got to go. It was nice to meet you all!" Hawkpaw scampered over toward her leader.

Flareheart spotted her apprentice and asked, "how did you think of the Gathering? Did you get to meet other apprentices?"

"The Gathering was awesome! A bit crowded for my taste though, and Lightningmask introduced me to some apprentices."

"Glad to hear. Who did you meet?"

"Pebblepaw, Ashpaw, Runningpaw and Maplepaw." She wrinkled her nose at the thought of the ShadowClan apprentice. "Although, Maplepaw came across arrogant, but the others were pretty nice."

"Make sure you learn as many names as possible and get a sense of your enemies. It comes in handy during battle. It's okay if you make friends in other Clans too, but don't get too attached, understand?" Hawkpaw nodded doubtfully. *How would it come in handy if I know a cat is stuck-up or not? Or better yet, how am I going to learn the names of all the cats?* These thoughts kept crossing her mind as she trudged back home.

As they neared the camp, she stiffened as a familiar scent wafted up her nose, *ShadowClan!* A shriek pierced the crisp air, "We're under attack!"

Chapter 6

[image]

Hawkpaw's heart raced as she charged into camp. Plunging inside, she was shocked to see the scene unfolding around her. Dozens of ShadowClan cats were attacking everywhere, claws flashing as they pushed back ThunderClan. She saw Lilyflower and Owlpelt guarding the entrance of the nursery from two burly toms, working in unison to push them back. Hightail was struggling against the cat she recognized as Sandfur while Fallengaze was grappling with a dark tabby tom. Stunned, Hawkpaw stood stiff at the entrance until Snakepaw barreled into her.

"Move it, you got to fight!" He hurried over to the queens with Rabbitpaw. Hawkpaw shook her head, this was no time to be scared. With a battle cry, she lunged at a gray tom. She landed on his back and sunk her claws into his flesh, making him howl with pain. She began churning her back paws while she bit into his shoulder, holding on tighter when he tried to throw her off. Finally, he bucked her off and pelted towards the entrance and back into the forest. Hawkpaw looked around to see if anyone needed assistance. The other elders joined Hightail, matching their blows paw-by-paw to fight back. Her littermates were with the queens and Flareheart was locked in a one-on-one battle with Amberfeet. Her mother and Raindapple were taking on Brindlespots and Goldenclaw, and her father was becoming overwhelmed by Longtooth and Berrypelt. She was about to race over to Fallengaze when Maplepaw leapt in front of her.

"Hey, remember me? This is going to be fun, you snake-tongue," she spat. Hawkpaw flattened her ears and bared her teeth, anger surging through her. She swiped her claws at Maplepaw but she ducked and executed a series of violent forepaw slashes on her. Claws raked Hawkpaw's muzzle, then her ears and her cheek. She tried to fend them off by returning the blows, but the flurry of paws was becoming too much for her. Her hind legs began to weaken from standing up for too long and her muscles were screaming for

her to stop. Maplepaw was too fast and relentless, and Hawkpaw collapsed when the she-cat ducked and bit her leg. She pinned Hawkpaw down and started raking her exposed stomach with her claws. Blood roared in her ears and red tinged her vision. *No! Come on, think! You can't lose to her.* Suddenly, she had an idea. Hawkpaw let herself go limp, pretending to be beaten and she felt Maplepaw's grip loosen as triumph lit her eyes. She pushed against her with all her might explosively, throwing her off and staggering up onto all fours. She didn't hesitate to jump onto the cat and bite her shoulder, blood welling up in her mouth. Maplepaw whimpered as she pressed her claws into her throat.

"Get out of here, mousefodder." She released Maplepaw and she stood up glaring before fleeing back to her territory.

"ShadowClan, retreat!" Inkstar's cry echoed around the stone hollow and ShadowClan warriors pelted away into the night. Victorious yowls rang into the sky, but Hawkpaw didn't join in. Before her very eyes, seeming to happen in slow motion, she saw Berrypelt sneak up on her father and bite the back of his neck. Fallengaze dropped to the ground and the red warrior licked his lips, blood staining his teeth. He then retreated back into the woods after murdering the gold tom, his yellow eyes meeting her's before he disappeared.

"Nooo!" She ran over to Fallengaze's side, burying her nose in his side. "Dad! Get up, dad!" Her vision blurred and grief swallowed her weakened heart. Her littermates slowly walked over and joined her, Sorrelbreeze hanging back.

"F-Fallengaze?" She lurched forward, crumpling on top of him while her body shook with sobs. Hawkpaw blocked out the voices around her, her heartache an insatiable fire that was burning strongly, suffocating her.

A shrill shriek rang out then, "Morningstar!" She glanced up to see her leader sprawled out on the floor. Brighteyes nudged him earnestly until his eyes snapped open. "Are you alright, my love?"

He groaned as he got up slowly, "Yeah, I'm okay. Just lost a life."

Brigheyes stared wide-eyed, "that was your sixth."

He smiled weakly, "I still have three left."

"What was ShadowClan thinking attacking our camp?" fretted Lavenderstripe.

"I bet they were hoping to drive us out to claim our territory," Webfur snarled. "Everyone knows that Twolegs have been destroying parts of their forest."

"They did seem rather thin at the Gathering," Lightningmask piped up.

"Well, there's nothing we can do about that right now. We won but lost a dear life," all the cats turned towards Hawkpaw and her family mourning over Fallengaze. She ignored them and tucked her paws underneath herself and pressed her nose against his soft fur. A rumble sounded in the distance and dark clouds rolled in, a light rain pattering down on her pelt. She fell asleep pressed against her father's body and brothers.

"I am sorry about your loss." Thistleclaw faded in, his pelt spiked up.

She sniffed, "why did you take him from me? Can I see him?" He shook his head. "Why not?"

"You aren't ready."

"How am I not ready? I was with him but a moment ago!" she shouted angrily.

"You're upset right now, and I understand your grieving. But use that sorrow to get more strength."

"Huh?"

"You want to avenge your father right?"

She thought about it, "I guess."

"ShadowClan is too cocky, if you will lead them you need to establish dominance. Murder Berrypelt." His eyes glinted even though there was no light.

"I can't just kill a cat without reason! It's against the warrior code!"

"But you have a reason," he spoke calmly. "He assassinated Fallengaze, which means you are allowed to kill him." She opened her mouth but nothing came out. *Is he right? Is it okay for me to kill Berrypelt? I suppose it is StarClan's wish.*

Hawkpaw looked up slowly, her dull eyes narrowed to slits, "teach me everything, Thistleclaw. I want to become strong." An odd, new feeling spread throughout her sore body, her heart deadened.

He smirked, "I shall."

"Hawkpaw? Hawkpaw? Hawkpaw!" A anxious mew brought her back to the real world, beams of light reflecting on the moist ground. She blinked rapidly and realized she was still outside next to Fallengaze.

"Hawkpaw, he's gone." Lightningmask's sympathetic whisper echoed in her ear. *Gone?* She realized that her father's fur was cold and his body stiff with frost.

"No!" She choked on a sob and stumbled back, falling against Lightningmask. He held her up and let her lean on him, his tail brushing her flank as he nuzzled her. His comfort didn't reach her though, instead a fresh surge of rage gushed into her head. ShadowClan was going to pay for what they did, she was going to make sure of that.

Newleaf was warming up the camp as Hawkpaw gathered beneath the highledge. Morningstar had called a clan meeting for Applekit's apprenticeship, the young tomcat prancing around his mother who was trying to clean him impatiently. "Hold still!" she scolded.

"Sorry, I'm just too excited." Applekit bushed out his pelt as Webfur purred happily.

"Good luck," he meowed.

"Thank you, dad." Hawkpaw flinched at *dad* and shifted her paws. The kit started towards Morningstar as the leader called his name. He tripped over his paws halfway and an amused purr erupted from the Clan.

Hawkpaw saw Ravenpelt lean over to Tallwhisker. "Don't you think it's a bit suspicious that Morningstar is making Applekit an apprentice now?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Fallengaze has just recently passed, so he's probably doing this just to try to lift the spirits of his Clan," he hissed in a whisper.

Tallwhisker only shrugged, "then that means he's trying to help us get over the loss of our comrade and move on. It's good that Morningstar cares enough to do his best for us, that's what good leaders do." Ravenpelt scowled and was about to say something else, but Tallwhisker nudged him, realizing Hawkpaw was watching with saddened eyes. *But I don't want to move on and forget about Fallengaze.*

"Applekit," Morningstar spoke as he halted in front of him. "It is time for you to become an apprentice. From this day on, until you earn your warrior name, you will be known as Applepaw. Your mentor will be Gentleleaf." The she-cat shot up at her name and strode towards her apprentice who was fidgeting. "Gentleleaf, you have received excellent training from Meadowstalker, and you have proven to be enthusiastic and clever, and I expect you to pass down all you know unto this apprentice." Gentleleaf stretched her neck and bumped her nose with Applepaw who pushed onward too hard.

"Applepaw! Applepaw!" Hawkpaw joined in the shouts blankly, her brothers yowling gleefully for their new denmate. The brown tom eagerly ran over to her.

"We're denmates now! Am I allowed to explore outside with you? I really want to see the forest!" He jumped up and down, a goofy grin on his face.

"I don't feel like going out right now, but I'm sure Gentleleaf wouldn't mind taking you."

"Oh, okay," his tail drooped and Gentleleaf padded over.

"What's wrong?"

"Hawkpaw doesn't want to come with us to the forest," he mumbled.

"Oh, well let's leave her alone right now. We can still go though," Gentleleaf shot her a concerned look as she prompted him. Although a moon had passed since Fallengaze's death, the Clan was still wary of her and remained at an awkward distance. Even her brothers were uncomfortable around her. The only cat that wasn't afraid to approach her was Lightningmask. The tom spent a lot of time with her lately and she appreciated it deeply.

"Fine, though it would be more fun with her." Applepaw bolted away and Gentleleaf scurried to catch up.

"Wait up!" Her whiskers twitched at the sight of the mentor chasing after her apprentice. The camp entrance swished just then as Lavenderstripe's hunting patrol returned, prey hanging from their jaws. Lightningmask steered towards her and dropped a mouse at her feet.

"Wanna share?" She shrugged and the two settled down at the edge of the hollow and ate together.

Aware that he was watching her, she quickly swallowed. "Did you catch this yourself?"

"Yup, it was really easy. It didn't even notice me," he mewed proudly.

"Haha! I'm surprised since a RiverClan cat can hear you twenty foxlengths away," she teased.

"Those fishfaces couldn't hear a monster if it were right in front of their snouts! Their ears are way too clogged with water and arrogance," he sneered and she suppressed a purr.

Duckfeather creeped over then, "Hawkpaw, can you help me gather some herbs?"

"Ugh, fine." She shook out her pelt and followed the medicine cat away, smiling apologetically at Lightningmask who watched them leave silently. They traveled to the abandoned Twoleg nest and entered inside, the musty smell clogging her glands.

"Grab some catmint for me, make sure you only get the leaves though and leave the stems." She sniffed the green, leafy plant and drool formed in her mouth from the delicious-smelling herb. She nipped off several leaves and carried them gently in her mouth, careful not to chew them although temptation curled in her stomach.

Without looking up, Duckfeather ordered, "leave those here next to me and get a few pieces of marigold."

"What's that?"

He sighed heavily, "the bright yellow flowers over there." He pointed his tail at a low-growing vegetable and she pulled off some of its blossoms and leaves, bundling them up in her paws.

"Careful!" he growled.

"Sorry," she laid them next to the other herbs and sat down with a slow breath.

"What's wrong?" The medicine cat was gazing questioningly out of the corner of his eye at her.

Hawkpaw hesitated , unsure if she should tell him. "Nothing, it's just that, I really need power. I feel so helpless right now and I hate it, I want to become formidable and tough. When Fallengaze was murdered, I couldn't do anything to stop it except stand there like a baffled idiot." She dug her claws in the ground, recalling that night.

"But you are only an apprentice, and it was his time. StarClan wanted him, there was nothing you, we, could do."

"Why should StarClan control us, they're just a bunch of dead cats,"

she muttered under her breath. She thought she saw the fur along Duckfeather's spine rise but he abruptly got up at the moment so she wasn't sure.

"Let's head back, carry the marigold please." She picked up the flowers and trotted after the black-and-white tom. She dropped off the bundle at his cave and started exiting when he called out after her, "Hawkpaw, we might not always understand why some things happen, but we need to trust our ancestors to guide us. There are cats out there who oppose the idea of not having control of everything, and those are the cats that drink our blood with pleasure." He watched her steadily, her fur rippling with unease.

"Your welcome," she meowed curtly and left. She gazed at the sky above, fluffy clouds drifting lazily through the air. A bird chirped, it's song meandering as the breeze shifted its course. She felt uncertain now, trouble raking her mind and she curled her lips in a snarl. *Duckfeather's wrong! Control is strength, hate is power, and I'm going to gain that.*

Chapter 7

[image]

"Keep your tail tucked when you stand up!" Thistleclaw hissed beside her. Hawkpaw fell back down on all fours panting, and tried again. She wrapped her tail around her hind legs as she reared, holding her paws up. "Now hold it," he growled. He inspected her position and finally gave a small nod for her to continue. She brought down her front paws onto her imaginary opponent, crushing them with her full weight. "Not bad, but your legs were shaking which means your enemy could have easily knocked you down before you got the chance to complete the upright lock. You need to strengthen your muscles if you want to perfect this. Let's do it again but against me this time. I will fight back so you'll have to try to wrestle me down first." Thistleclaw crouched before her and hissed. Hawkpaw unsheathed her claws and reared, quickly wrapping her tail, but he did the same and more swiftly. She wrestled with him, his claws sinking into her skin as they tousled. Thistleclaw then flipped her under him and started raking her belly with thorn-sharp claws. She yowled and wriggled trying to escape, yet to no prevail. Hawkpaw finally managed to kick him off and speedily sliced downward at his face, but he twisted out of the way and sunk his teeth in her scruff shaking it hard. He shook her head so violently she became too rattled to fight back as he flung her against a tree. She landed with a groan and laid there, wheezing for breath.

"You're still to weak! Get up, we're doing it again." Hawkpaw got up and swayed, crimson blood pooling from her wounds.

"Here I come," she lunged and raised a paw to swipe at his right ear. He ducked to avoid her strike and rose up, towering over her. Quickly Hawkpaw rolled onto her back, slithered beneath his body, and in one fast movement kicked both her back legs upward into his belly. Thistleclaw was flung backwards and fell onto the dark earth with a loud grunt. She didn't wait to get on top and pin him down, smiling with success. She let him stand up and he licked his

paw in thought, eyeing her.

Thistleclaw meowed softly, "You might be ready shortly."

Hawkpaw's feet tingled, "ready for what?"

"You'll see soon enough, be patient." Hawkpaw woke up with a jolt in her nest and found caked blood on her pelt. Looking around nervously, she washed herself, trying to cover up her wounds. After a while she laid her head down on her paws, yet was unable to fall asleep. She sighed and stretched, crawling out of her nest and trotting over to the dirt-place to relieve herself. She heard snores from Daisypelt inside the nursery who had transferred there a quarter-moon ago, affirming her theory that she would move in when newleaf came. Moonface, who was on guard duty, acknowledged her with a slight gesture. She inclined her head and ducked into the dirtplace. After finishing up, she took a stroll through the deciduous woodland making up ThunderClan's territory. She breathed in the rich scent of the fragrance of the wet leaves and loam. Every kind of life, from the humble beetle to the enchanting songbird, where awake and bustling about. The only movement was the occasional bird startled in a tree or a squirrel dashing up a nearby trunk, the sound of the waves lapping on the shore from the lake kept the same hypnotic quality. She took in all the air her lungs could hold and expelled it slowly, relishing this moment of bliss and the cascading light, a brilliant white shaft warming her pelt.

"Hawkpaw? What are you doing out here so early?" She whirled around but relaxed when she saw it was just Morningstar.

"I was just getting some fresh air."

"I understand, it can get cramped inside the camp. Trust me I know, I am there a lot."

"Why don't you come out more often?"

He purred, "well, I'm older now and it's becoming more difficult to move around so much. Though I still go out on patrols once in a while to see how the Clan is doing."

"Do you like being leader?"

"Of course, but I have to remind myself it is a privilege and I shouldn't take it for granted. Many cats dream to become leader and I am just lucky enough to have reached this position, although sometimes it may become a bit overwhelming, but in the end I will always put my life before the Clan." She nodded and scuffled the ground with her paw.

"Do you ever want more?"

"What?"

She shook her head, "nothing. I'm going back now, Flareheart will be mad if I don't go out on a patrol." She padded away feeling Morningstar's stare burning on the back of her pelt. At the camp, Flareheart was starting the patrols and she scurried over to join.

"Tallwhisker, take a border patrol to the WindClan border with Brighteyes, Webfur and Snakepaw." The pale tabby nodded and headed out with his patrol, his unusually long whiskers bobbing. "Sparrowclaw take a hunting patrol by the abandoned Twoleg nest with Gentleleaf, Lightningmask and Applepaw."

Applepaw swiped the air excitedly, "Yes! I am going to catch the biggest piece of prey!"

Flareheart continued, "Then I will lead another hunting patrol with Ravenpelt and Hawkpaw."

"I'll join you guys," Morningstar crossed over to them.

"Morningstar? You sure you want to come?"

"Yeah, these old bones need some good stretching."

Okay, we'll be hunting around the Sky Oak then," she sounded baffled but flicked her tail-tip anyways. Morningstar winked at Hawkpaw as he trotted ahead and she giggled. They reached the Sky Oak that was now thick with foliage thanks to the kiss of newleaf, and waited for Flareheart's order. "Let's split up for now, and we can meet back here when we're finished."

"Okay," Ravenpelt swiftly strode away, his sleek black pelt disappearing into the tree line. Hawkpaw stalked towards the lake shore and tasted the air, *shrew!* The gray rodent was digging for food so she crouched, moving one paw at a time quietly. When she was close enough, she pounced but landed a mouselength away causing it to squeal and scurry away.

"Mousedung!" she cursed and kicked a pebble into the lake, ripples erupting from where the stone landed. She followed the fear-drenched scent line of the shrew hoping it didn't hide in its burrow and luckily found it scratching at a nut. She snuck up on it and leapt onto its back, killing with a quick nip to the back of its neck. "Ha!" She buried it and patted the loose soil before moving on. After a few minutes, she found a squirrel at the base of a tree and crept forward. Hawkpaw wiggled her haunches and burst into a run, startling the creature and pursued it through the feathery fronds whipping against her fur. She caught up to it and killed it swiftly. She carried the squirrel back to the spot where she buried the shrew and took both back to the Sky Oak where Ravenpelt had a thrush at his feet. She dropped her prey and groomed herself as they waited for the others.

"Good catch," he mewed.

"Thanks, you too." The conversation died and she thought, *he's not one for talking, huh?*

At that moment, the silence was broken by movement in the underbrush as a small ginger she-cat with a blaze of orange around her neck stepped out. "Flareheart! What did you catch?"

She sighed, "not much unfortunately, just a mouse. Where's Morningstar?"

"Not back yet," Ravenpelt said. Flareheart glanced at the sky.

"I'm going to look for him, it's already sunhigh and the Clan will be hungry."

"Should we head back awhile?"

"Sure, we'll see you back at camp. Take my mouse with you two," she meowed before padding away. Ravenpelt picked up her mouse by its tail and his bird, walking into the forest without bothering to wait for Hawkpaw. She frowned and took her haul back. After dropping off the prey at the heap of fresh-kill, she yawned and spotted Fuzzykit following Duckfeather around. *What's that kit up to? Isn't she frightened by Duckfeather, he is a grump after all.*

Curiosity spiked her pelt and she was about to investigate when a yowl sounded: "Hawkpaw! Come get these irritating fleas out of my fur! I know you came back so don't even think about hiding!"

She growled as she stomped over to the medicine cat's den, "I wish I could get the annoying *elder* out of my hair." She saw Duckfeather sorting through herbs and asked, "Mouse-bile please?"

"Hunting ticks, huh? What did you do?" He tossed a wet moss bundle at her and returned to his duty.

"Nothing special, just a victim of Ravenpelt." She picked it up and wrinkled her nose at the rancid smell. She ducked inside the elders' den and was greeted by a grouchy Robinpelt who was nibbling at his flank.

"Took you long enough," he snarled.

"Sorry, let me help." She dug through his fur and bit fleas, pressing the soaked moss-ball on his coat. After she was finished she picked up the wad of moss and walked out. *Not even a meager thanks!* she fumed. She returned the ball of moss to the medicine cat's den and ate the mouse Flareheart caught. *They're still not back. Wonder where they are.* Hawkpaw felt fearful for her mentor and leader. *I hope nothing bad happened, we were going to practice battle moves with Snakepaw and Rabbitpaw.*

Just then she saw a familiar peach-colored coat with ginger stripes. She leaped to her paws and addressed her mother, "Sorrelbreeze! How are you doing?"

Sorrelbreeze's voice was barely audible, "I am doing well. I think I'm going to rest now."

"Now? Isn't it kind of early?" she asked confused. What was wrong with her mom? She wasn't acting like her normal self.

"Sorrelbreeze, what are you doing out here? Come on, dear." Raindapple led her mother to the warriors' den, their tails vanishing into the darkness. *What's going on with her?*

Flareheart finally came back with Morningstar. "Hey, Hawkpaw. Ready to train?" She saw a scrawny mouse swinging in Morningstar's jaws as he passed them, and she narrowed her eyes in suspicion. *It took them that long to catch that scrap?* She didn't say anything, just nodded. "Go fetch Snakepaw, Rabbitpaw and Applepaw."

"I think Applepaw is still out actually."

"Really? Maybe we should wait for them, I know he wanted to train with us."

She groaned, "I'm so sick of waiting."

Flareheart laughed, "you need to learn patience. You must sit tight now." She huffed but thankfully Applepaw stormed in at that moment with his hunting patrol.

"Let's train!" he demanded excitedly. Hawkpaw smothered a laugh with her paw and cleared her throat.

"Are you ready for some intense fighting?" she taunted.

"Yeah! Come on, I'll race you there."

"You're on!" She charged after him, ignoring her mentor's call to hold up. *I'm done waiting, I want to show off my new moves from Thistleclaw!*

She hared after Applepaw, pushing harder with every stride until she was neck and neck with the young cat. He glanced over at her as she passed him and she skidded to a halt when they reached the mossy clearing, Applepaw scrambling to a messy stop.

The others caught up moments later and Flareheart scolded her,

"You shouldn't have raced off like that! What if one of you got hurt?"

She snorted, "Oh please, what could have possibly happened?"

Flareheart glared down at her, "don't speak back to your mentor like that. I can make you clean the elders' nests and pick their fleas for a moon if you like." Hawkpaw scowled.

"Can we just start?" she dug her claws in the soft ground impatiently, itching to fight.

"Let's see how far you've gotten. Battle against Snakepaw to begin with. Is that alright with you, Webfur?"

Her brother's mentor agreed and Snakepaw pushed past her. "Let's see what you got, Lamepaw."

"Ha! Are you even trying to insult me?" She spat as she faced Snakepaw in the clearing and flattened her ears threateningly. He crouched, waiting for approval to start.

"Go!" Webfur yowled and Snakepaw reared but Hawkpaw lashed out with her back legs, taking weight off her front paws, and surprised him with the explosive move. He was pushed back into defense as she stood up on her back paws, tucking her fluffy tail around them. She remembered her lessons on the upright lock with Thistleclaw and brought down her full weight on him, crushing him. She let out a wail of triumph.

"Gr, you cheated!" Snakepaw yelled.

"How did I cheat, *Lame*paw?" She used the nickname he gave her earlier against him and he snarled.

"Okay break it up you two, only kits call each other names." Cloudchaser stepped between them.

"He started it!"

"Kits are also tattletales, should you be sent back to the nursery?"

"Sorry," she mumbled.

Cloudchaser's expression softened, "good job though, you fought well." Hawkpaw brightened up from his praise and smirked at her brother who was angrily licking his fur. "Next, let's have Rabbitpaw and Snakepaw."

"Aww, I want to go again."

"You will," promised Flareheart. "Sit here until then." She patted the ground next to her and Hawkpaw lowered her haunches on the dry earth.

"That was awesome!" Applepaw whispered to her.

"Thanks," she purred. She watched her littermates fight, Snakepaw easily defeating Rabbitpaw with the back leg rake. *How pathetic, Rabbitpaw was beaten in less than a heartbeat.* She nudged Applepaw, "I think we're up next."

His eyes widened, "really? I get to go against you?"

She laughed, "exciting right? Come on." She entered the arena again and lowered herself until her stomach brushed the moss.

"Begin!" Flareheart's shout rung in her ears and she targeted his legs with a paw strike, unbalancing him. He yelped as he dropped and all of a sudden, her eyes thinned to slits, an odd ringing in her mind. Whispers echoed in her head, *kill, kill, kill*. She tried to block the voice but it only grew stronger and seemed to take control of her. Before she knew it her claws were unsheathed and she dove toward Applepaw, catching his chin and drawing blood in the process.

"H-Hawkpaw?" His frightened mew drove her on. *Stop!* she screamed in her mind. *What are you doing, stop it!* Fear rose within in her as she bit his neck, churning her back paws on his shoulder, sending fur clumps flying behind her and blood splattering the grass. Red tinged the edge of her vision and everything was going black. *What's happening to me?!*

Gentleleaf jumped in and jaws closed around her neck fur as she

hauled her off, holding her down. "Hawkpaw! Sheathe your claws, what do you think you're doing?" Her furious meow drew her back into reality and she gasped for breath, retracting her talons.

Flareheart's eyes were round with shock and horror as she stared at her. "You can't attack your Clanmate! What in StarClan's name were you thinking?"

Hawkpaw blinked. Applepaw was trembling, bloody and tattered, on the ground beside his mentor. *What was that? What have I done?*

Chapter 8

[image]

Flareheart dropped her mew to a snarl, her pelt spiked with rage. "Go back to camp to clear your head. You know you're not supposed to use your claws in training, I am very disappointed in you. Morningstar will be hearing about this." Hawkpaw hung her head and dragged her feet away from the shocked cats surrounding her. *I'm sorry.*

Instead of going back to the stone hollow, Hawkpaw dawdled over to the lake, staring over the edge at her reflection. An array of fish swam beneath the water, their tails sending up bubbles and ripples on the calm surface. The lake-side air was pungent with the fragrance of damp soil, the slippery stones underneath her pads cooling them down. She slapped her image and growled in frustration. *Great, just great. Now I am going crazy and won't be made a warrior until I'm an elder thanks to my slip up today. Why did I do that even? It was like, I had no control over myself.*

A snap of a twig behind her made her whip around, the fur along her spine ruffled in fear. She calmed down when she saw

Lightningmask emerge from the edge of the trees. "Great StarClan, you nearly gave me a heart attack."

He grinned sheepishly, "my bad. What are doing out here by yourself?"

She sighed and turned back around and wrapped her tail around paws, "I messed up today, but, I didn't try it. It felt like there was another *me* taking over, it was strange."

"You got bees in your brains, you furball," he purred as he sat down next to her.

"Maybe so." She broke off and watched the sun beginning to dip behind the horizon, cascading a bombardment of colors that were flung across the sky with terrible alacrity, the receding blues and oranges clashing with the inky stain pushing it away. It shone on the lake below, the radiant glow scintillated and she gazed mesmerized as the claw-moon appeared on its facade, silverpelt hanging above. "Moonrise is so beautiful," she breathed.

"Just like you," Lightningmask whispered.

"Don't make fun of me," she pouted.

"Haha, yeah sorry..." his voice trailed off and she realized he was smiling softly at her, the moon making his ivory face ignite white hot. She felt her pelt burn awkwardly as he hesitantly licked her cheek. She stared into his deep-set blue eyes and blushed, thankful for her fur covering it. She groomed her own chest fur absent mindfully.

"L-let's go back, w-we shouldn't be out here for too long or else everyone will worry." Hawkpaw stammered and led the way back to the ThunderClan bivouac, her tail flicking restlessly. Lightningmask strode beside her, his eyes kept wandering to her curiously as they maneuvered through the foliage. They departed ways in the center of camp by saying short farewells and she circled twice in her nest before settling down. *What was that? Nothing, we're just friends and he was only comforting you. Don't over read silly things like that,* she chided to herself before falling asleep.

"So, you and Lightningmask," Thistleclaw snarled, his sharp amber eyes narrowed.

"Thistleclaw! That doesn't matter right now, what happened to me earlier?" Hawkpaw was in StarClan again, her panic of the event earlier today replaying in her mind.

"What are you talking about?"

"Didn't you see? I had no command over myself, I nearly killed Applepaw!" she cried.

"But that was you, your true self." Thistleclaw said in an eerie tone. "You need to understand that killing is natural in the process of becoming the greatest warrior, a little blood on your paws won't hurt."

"But their my clanmates!"

"Some of your clanmates will remain traitorous and try to bring you down, so the best answer is to get rid of them, permanently." His voice was ice cold and sent a shudder down her spine.

"I'm not sure if I want this," she whispered.

"Do you not want to become the best? Are you scared?" Thistleclaw growled.

"I never imagined StarClan would be like this."

"Like what? Not afraid to kill for the greater good? We know what's most sensible, trust us." Thistleclaw brushed against her and hissed, "Stay with me."

Hawkpaw shuffled her paws looking down at them, "I will."

"Good," he purred and broke off from her. "Now let's practice."

The dawn light seeped through the bramble stems covering the apprentices' den opening, reaching Hawkpaw whose bed was pressed against the back wall of the cave along with her littermates. She yawned and got out of bed on stiff legs, her joints aching from

the training. She gazed sadly at Applepaw who was sleeping soundly. She hadn't had the chance to apologize yet, afraid to speak to him and make things worse between them. Outdoors, she was met by a cross Flareheart who was sitting on the ground tensely. "You're up at least," she snapped. "The others must think dawn patrol is a joke or something."

"I can try to wake them up if you like," she offered knowing it was best to stay on her good side when she was in a mood like this.

"Please," she meowed brusquely. Hawkpaw ducked inside the warriors' den and was overcome with the heat from the sleeping bodies. She prodded Brighteyes in the rib cage rousing her, and butted Moonface with her muzzle. She left them stirring in their burrows and crossed back over to her mentor. "Well?"

"They're coming." Flareheart let a breath out and got up as the other two crawled outside.

"Oh my, it's so early," Brighteyes squinted at the sun as Moonface sauntered over slowly, his eyes half closed. Flareheart rolled her eyes and the patrol left, traveling down to the WindClan border.

"Hey, Flareheart, can we practice after this?" She saw her mentor stiffen and Hawkpaw cringed. "Or not actually, it's fine."

"We can do a run-through, but I want you to collect moss for the elders first as punishment." Hawkpaw gave a timid nod and they walked on in muteness until they reached the scent line. "All right, let's start from the edge and work our way down." Hawkpaw began spraying thickets of bracken, staring out across the moor. It seemed to stretch on forever, the rolling hills dotted with heather and white fluffy shapes.

"Is that sheep?" she asked, pointing her tail at the odd figures.

"Yup, they don't ever stray on our side so don't worry about them. Plus, I hear they're harmless and don't give a mousetail about cats, you can sleep under them for all they care," Moonface mewed. She giggled at the thought of sleeping under one of those things and continued. As the sun climbed into the sky, it tinged the leaves with

a warm glow and dappled the ground below, making a decorative pattern on her coat. She gave a sigh of relief when they finished and flexed her claws.

Flareheart meowed, "we can go back now, I'm starving."

"You still have to set up patrols for today," Brighteyes reminded her.

"I don't think they'll mind if I grab a quick bite."

"If there's anything left," Moonface chuckled.

"I can only hope, the heap was pretty low when we left and I can't help myself until the queens and elders are fed. We just have too many hungry mouths to feed."

"There aren't that many."

"Whatever. Hawkpaw, you can go get that moss awhile. You'll find some dry lichen by the training hollow."

"Okay, bye." Hawkpaw waved her tail and sped off, twisting nimbly around trunks and shrubs until she reached the clearing. She began gathering moss by extending her claws to their full length and slicing quickly, as Flareheart had shown her. She pulled her paw toward her and rolled up the moss into a compact ball, repeating it several times until she got several bundles. "How am I going to carry all this myself?" she growled in frustration. She collected a few in her mouth and clutched the last two against her chest with her claws, hobbling away. As she limped inside the camp, she heard a burst of laughter from her right. She glanced over as Snakepaw was rolling on his back with laughter.

"StarClan's kits you look like an abomination!"

"Instead of making fun of me maybe you'd like to help instead?" she growled.

His whiskers twitched, "nah, I'm good like this. It's entertaining." She glowered at him and staggered inside the elders' den.

"Here's some fresh moss for your nests," she meowed as she spat out

the clumps.

"Do mind to weave it into our nests? I'm afraid I've been having some back pain lately, youngin'," Cedarbelly rasped. The old, light brown tom seemed more scrawny than usual, his white belly matted with dirt.

"I would appreciate that too," Hightail yawned, his long tail curled over his nose.

"Sure, I don't mind." She began to entwine the lichen, looping it tidily as she worked rapidly. After the fresh moss was woven in Cedarbelly's nest, she moved on to Hightail, knitting it neatly.

"You're great at this," Hightail purred hoarsely.

"Don't forget me," Robinpelt croaked.

"Oh, I could never forget you, Robinpelt," she muttered. When she was finished she bowed to the elders before trotting away.

"Thank you!" Cedarbelly called after her.

Sorrelbreeze was pressed against the wall of the camp, sheltered in the fronds of a fern beside Raindapple who was murmuring something to her. "Sorrelbreeze! Do you want to hunt?" Hawkpaw pranced over and nuzzled her cheek.

"No thanks, dear. I don't feel well and think it's best to stay inside for now." Her mew sounded like she was grinding sand on her teeth, her eyes dull and despondent.

"B-but..."

"Leave her alone, she's still grieving, Hawkpaw." Raindapple warned her and turned back to her mother.

"Its nearly been a moon since Fallengaze's death, and you're still upset? You have to move on, you can't neglect your duties and clanmates!" she exclaimed.

"I'm sorry, dear, it's been too hard for me."

"Hard for *you*? What about your kits? Don't you think we're distressed too? You should have been there for us, but instead you're sulking over Fallengaze still! He's probably dismayed to see you in a state like this, forsaking your Clan and family," she snarled as anger boiling inside her.

Sorrelbreeze flinched and seemed to shrink inside her pelt as Raindapple yelled, "Stop it, Hawkpaw! Leave her alone!" She scowled and stomped away, her tail flicking in annoyance. *Sorrelbreeze's being so stupid, neglecting her Clan! How dare she? What about her kits? Don't we still matter to her?*

"Higher!" Thistleclaw's command echoed in her ears as she stretched. "Good! Let's move on to something new now." He flicked his hind legs into the air, spun around on his forepaws and leaped backward, then reared up and raked the air with each paw before tucking his head down and doing a neat forward roll.

"Wow, let me try!" Hawkpaw eagerly attempted it but landed on her back as she tried to roll. A purr rumbled in his throat and he helped her up.

"I can see this taking awhile."

"Let me do it again, I'll get it!" Thistleclaw watched as she kept failing, frustration curling in her claws. "Ah, this is impossible!"

"No, your just not focusing, something's bothering you."

"So what?" she growled.

"What's going on?"

"Sorrelbreeze!" she spat. "She's still grieving over Fallengaze and acting so weak, she won't even hunt anymore."

"Hmpf, she sounds like a pathetic cat all right, almost half-dead."

"Yeah, and it's really getting under my skin. She completely forgot about Rabbitpaw, Snakepaw and I. I don't think she loves us anymore," admitting the ugly truth hurt her more than she thought it would, like a needle to her heart.

"It's okay, that doesn't matter now. I'm here for you, and I promise I'll make you into the most distinguished warrior ever." Hawkpaw breathed in his musky odor, unclenching her jaw. She didn't need her mother anymore, she wasn't a kit, she was an independent cat who was steadily climbing up the ranks and growing stronger with each day. Her mother was foolish and pitiful, unlike herself.

Chapter 9

[image]

The soft drizzle of rain fell gingerly and droplets clung to her lashes. Curling her lip, Hawkpaw watched as Sorrelbreeze shakily got up and dipped her head to Morningstar. She was still sulking over the fight she had with her the other day, but felt somewhat guilty for saying such harsh things to her mother. *It doesn't matter, it's her fault for being so mouse-brained in the first place, she deserved that.* Hawkpaw was convincing herself as she heard Sorrelbreeze murmur to Morningstar, "I'm going to get fresh air by the ShadowClan border."

Morningstar tilted his head, "Why there?"

"I have my reasons," she wandered away and Hawkpaw stared in shock, *she's actually leaving the camp? Was it because of what I told her yesterday?*

Hawkpaw noticed Rabbitpaw speaking with Applepaw and Snakepaw sitting a taillength away, scuffling the dirt with his paws. She walked over to her silver tabby brother and nudged him.

"What?"

"Is Applepaw still upset with me?"

"What do you think?"

Hawkpaw furrowed her brows and glanced over at the young apprentice who was staring at her with wide eyes. "I don't know how to make up with him."

"Why not actually apologize," Snakepaw suggested in a 'duh' tone.

She stuck out her tongue, "I don't think it's that easy."

"You might be surprised, Applepaw is a fuzz-brain who can get over anything. He'll probably forget all about this incident in a moon."

"That's too long," decided Hawkpaw. "I need to fix this now." She squared her shoulders and marched towards Applepaw who winced as she stopped in front of him. "Um, do you want to go on a walk with me? So we can, um, like talk about things?"

"Smooth," Snakepaw scoffed.

"Shut up! Anyways, what do you say?" Applepaw looked over at Rabbitpaw who gave him an encouraging nod, and he mewed softly:

"Sure."

Hawkpaw's muscles slackened and she smiled, "great! Come on then!" They walked through the entrance, their pelts snagging on the thorn tunnel as they pushed through it, Hawkpaw in the lead with Applepaw following apprehensively. It was sunhigh now, the clouds had cleared and the wind dropped as it rustled the leaves muffling their pawsteps on the earth. Below, in the dazzling sunlight, stood the Sky Oak with its dark green crown swaying in the breeze.

"I had no idea we came so far, oh well." Hawkpaw shrugged and sat beneath the large tree, beckoning Applepaw with her tail. "I wanted to apologize for harming you in training, I honestly don't know

what came over me. I know it must be hard for you to forgive me, but I still want to be friends even after all that. I'm really sorry. I promise I won't do it again," she smiled at him and he sucked his teeth in, debating.

After a moment of awkward silence, Applepaw finally licked her paw and meowed, "I forgive you, so let's put it behind us now."

"Mm!" Hawkpaw giggled and got up, "Let's race again, and this time I'll give you a head start."

"I don't need a head start!" he fluffed up his fur in mock offense.

"We'll see about that," she started running off into the undergrowth and heard Applepaw scramble after her.

"No fair! You got a running start!" Her heart pounding, she sprinted across the soft earth as they weaved among the bramble tendrils, branches hooking her pelt. Adrenaline pulsed through her paws as she gained speed, her breath coming in short spurts and her lungs beginning to burn. The rain now poured down as a heavy downpour, roaring like a lion while it assailed her. She ran across the slippery path, her posture weakened by the weight of her soaked fur. As they neared the border of ShadowClan, the sharp tang of blood hit her and she abruptly halted, Applepaw crashing into her.

He rubbed his snout, "why did you stop like that? I nearly broke my nose!" He stopped as he sniffed the air, "what's that smell?"

Hawkpaw didn't answer since fear was rising inside her, *Sorrelbreeze went for a walk around the ShadowClan border!* She crept forward and gasped. On the ground in a pool of blood, her mother laid there. She looked back at Applepaw who was trembling behind her, "go fetch Duckfeather." He stared at her frozen with fear, "Go!" He sped off, his back paws throwing up dirt in his haste. She cast her eyes back to her mother and swallowed back a lump in her throat. "Mother?" Sorrelbreeze's eyes were fixed and vacant. She was gone. Her mind struggled to stay in that moment as she crumpled down on her knees, the odor of death rose in the air like invisible smoke. Hawkpaw shuffled forward and flung herself on Sorrelbreeze's rain-

matted pelt, stained from the crimson blood and already losing its warmth of life. She saw that her mangled mouth was slightly opened, her tongue hanging loose. A thin slit was apparent on her neck, the cause of her death.

"I'm so sorry, mother. I'm sorry," she whispered. Then she saw it, the clumps of red fur caught in Sorrelbreeze's outstretched claws. She sucked in a breath and sniffed it, recognizing the unpleasant smell of Berrypelt. "That fox-heart!" she spat. *He must of thought that the rain would cover his scent, but he didn't think about her claws!*

Just then Applepaw returned with Duckfeather, Morningstar, Brighteyes and Flareheart. Duckfeather sniffed Sorrelbreeze and shook his head slowly, causing a fresh wave of anguish crashing over her. She wailed, her cry carried into the gloomy, afternoon sky.

"Oh, Hawkpaw, you poor thing," Flareheart murmured softly, rubbing her tail on her spine. "Come on." Hawkpaw leaned on Flareheart, Brighteyes holding her up on her other side. They led her back to camp deliberately, rain and tears blurring her sight. She nestled inside her moss bed, tucking her paws underneath herself and felt a sob rack her body. Rabbitpaw came in and snuggled with her, his refreshing scent soothing her.

"Don't you want to come and say your final goodbye to Sorrelbreeze?"

"She doesn't want me too," Hawkpaw sniffed.

"I don't believe that for a heartbeat, she loved you dearly! I'm sure she wants to feel you one more time."

No she doesn't!" Hawkpaw snapped. "She was too busy feeling sorry for herself to even pay attention to us. Besides, we fought before she died, I'd feel too ashamed to weep over her now." Rabbitpaw searched her face and eventually shook his head.

"I think that's a shame, but I won't force you. I'll be outside with Snakepaw if you'd like to join us," he stood up and slunk back outside. Hawkpaw watched as the Clan gathered around

Sorrelbreeze's body, cleaned by the elders. Duckfeather brought some herbs from his den and laid them along her flank. Hawkpaw could smell their pungent green odor as it masked the scent of death. Snakepaw along with Rabbitpaw settled beside her, and Raindapple pressed her muzzle into Sorrelbreeze's fur. "My dear friend, you will be missed dearly. May you find good hunting, swift running, and shelter when you sleep." Her voice cracked as she spoke and Hawkpaw's heart twisted. *Oh, Sorrelbreeze. Forgive me, please!*

The rest of the Clan waited at the edge of the clearing for the night vigil to start. As the light drained away, the darkness came and under it everything in the forest was hidden. Hawkpaw watched the sun sink below the steep wall of the camp and huddled deeper in her nest, relieved as the shadows swallowed her. Droplets of water from the previous rainfall disturbed her, her tail-tip flicking irritably. Eventually, weariness and grief sent her into a sound sleep, and she awoke in StarClan.

Thistleclaw materialized from the woods and stared at her without a word, waiting patiently for the question that burst from her mouth, "Why did you take Sorrelbreeze too? What did she ever do to deserve that?"

"She is in a better place now, what does it matter? Besides, weren't you the one who said you despised her for being feeble and thoughtless? I believe I am doing you a favor here since she was holding you back."

"That's not true! I mean, kind of." Hawkpaw was at a loss for words, unsure how to respond. Did she really say all that? Did her mother deserve to die because of her? "So, it's my fault."

"I suppose," Thistleclaw responded calmly. "Are you okay with that?" She didn't answer just stared at her paws. "I think you're ready, Hawkpaw." She looked up as the fog parted and a mottled brown-and-ginger tom with a nick in his ear padded out, a red tom behind him. *Berrypelt!* She inhaled sharply as she saw the ShadowClan warrior emerge from the forest.

The first tom dipped his wide head and growled, "he is ready,

Thistleclaw."

"Good. As is my apprentice, Redwillow. Let them fight." *Fight?* She glanced from Thistleclaw to Redwillow and then glared at Berrypelt. *I'm fine with that.*

"Hawkpaw, I still believe you are the fated one, but Berrypelt has also been training with us. Don't underestimate him. Prove to me that you are the destined cat, kill him, the murderer of your parents. Avenge their deaths." His voice was forbidding and sent a chill down her spine.

Berrypelt inspected his claws bored and mewed, "Can I kill her now?" Hawkpaw then realized it. *He doesn't think I can actually lay a talon on him. Well, I'll show him,* she unsheathed her claws, *the hard way.* She yowled and lunged towards Berrypelt. Berrypelt dodged and rammed his head into her stomach, knocking the air out of her. Hawkpaw gritted her teeth to keep from screaming and steadied herself. Springing forward she clamped her jaw down on his tail. He growled and swiped at her face, scratching her muzzle, forcing her to let go. Before she could adjust he was on her back and digging his sharp claws into her skin, trickles of blood rolling down her pelt as she thrashed wildly, trying to shake him off. No matter how hard she tried he wouldn't come off, so she forced herself to go limp recalling the last time it worked. Relaxing her muscles as if in submission, she let out a pretend howl of alarm as he bit down. Hawkpaw surged upward with all the strength she could muster and Berrypelt gave a snarl of surprise as he was thrown clear and tumbled backward.

Hawkpaw stood back up and began to zig-zag in front of him. The mangy tom growled with confusion and she quickly darted behind him and raked her claws down his spine. He whirled around to attack again, but she was ready for him, lashing out and catching his face several times with her claws before he leapt back.

"Die already, mouse-heart!" He suddenly pinned her down by her shoulders and clawed at her back till she squealed and struggled away from him, flailing blindly and kicked in the flank. As Berrypelt reared up, towering over her, Hawkpaw quickly rolled onto her back and in one fast movement kicked both back legs

upward into his belly. He was flung backward and she pounced on him, holding him down. Berrypelt yowled in anger and whipped his head around, snapping repeatedly than collapsing on the ground.

"Finish it!" Thistleclaw bellowed from across the small clearing. Hawkpaw felt her vision darken, her nerves twitching uncontrollably. She sunk her teeth into his neck and tasted the flow of bitter blood filling her mouth. She clenched his throat harder, shaking it as Berypelt made gurgling sounds.

"H-how is this possible?" he sputtered before ceasing from moving, his body lax in her jaws. Hawkpaw released her grip on him, spitting out lumps of fur as she stepped back, viewing her victory. *I did it.* She cleaned the bloods off her paws as Thistleclaw swarmed around her, a purr escaping his lips.

"I knew you could do it! Berrypelt perished a humiliating death thanks to you, you have earned my deepest respect." Hawkpaw beamed, satisfaction spreading throughout her. *I killed Berrypelt! I avenged my parents rightfully.*

"I have one more question for you, Hawkpaw."She cocked her head. "Do you accept yourself completely and trust us to care for you here on?"

She thought about it. *I suppose it isn't that bad to kill after all, I can live live with stained paws.* "I promise, Thistleclaw."

"Good, I will see you tomorrow then. Anything you'd like to add, Redwillow?"

The sleek tom growled, "Berrypelt was obviously weak if he were to be defeated by an apprentice. Hawkpaw, I hope you don't disappoint me like he did. I look forward to watch you progress." With that, Redwillow padded away, his tail whisking furiously behind him. Hawkpaw closed her eyes feeling her heart become tainted with the taste of slaughter, a stone-cold heart. *I will embrace my other half, if it leads to strength. I'll do whatever it takes. After all, StarClan wants me to follow this path.*

Chapter 10

[image]

Silverpelt shone brightly with clusters of faint and bold stars cast out into the wide expanse of the inky sky. The moonlight splashed down its watery white-silver glow onto the Clans, bathing them, illuminating them. In the distance the trees were silhouetted against the deep velvety sky. Hawkpaw watched the cats mingling on the island, no spark of interest in her for the Gathering. She would have preferred to stay at camp and rest so she could train with Thistleclaw, but Flareheart insisted that she go since it would only be her second time and she should try to get to know more apprentices. Hawkpaw recognized Pebblepaw's silver coat and slipped through crowds of pelts to reach him. As she burst through she became aware that he was talking with a long-haired gray tom who was built solidly, his muscles quivering beneath his pelt.

She started backing up when Pebblepaw saw her and meowed cheerfully, "Oh, Hawkpaw! Good to see you again. This is my Clanmate, Sharkpaw, he's nearly a warrior and a good friend of mine." The large tom looked down at her for a moment.

"ThunderClan, I'm surprised you snake-hearts haven't taken in any kittypets lately!" He spat the word *kittypet* scornfully, then turned

and stalked off.

"Sorry about that, he's been in a mood lately but is usually pretty nice." Pebblepaw apologized as she stared at him. *I can't believe those two are friends, they're like complete opposites. Pebblepaw is kind and friendly, but Sharkpaw is the definition of fishfur.* She shrugged and glanced around.

"Are there other apprentices here tonight?"

"Yup, I saw Brownpaw and Maplepaw earlier." Hawkpaw stiffened at the mention of Maplepaw, the cat whom she battled with three moons ago when Fallengaze died.

Trying to shake off the memory she asked, "Who's Brownpaw?"

"He is an apprentice in WindClan, who's mentor I'm pretty sure is Crowfall. You can probably guess from his name that he's a plain brown tom," Pebblepaw laughed.

"Oh, did you meet my brothers yet?" He tilted his head in confusion and she guessed not. "Come, I want you to meet them, although only Snakepaw is here with me tonight." She guided him to her littermate who was talking with a speckled brown tom that reeked of fish.

Pebblepaw twitched his ear, "Hi, Troutfur." The warrior craned his neck around and grunted in response.

Snakepaw looked over quizzically, "Who's that, Hawkpaw?"

"This is my friend, Pebblepaw." She faced him and pointed at her brother, "that's Snakepaw, one of my two brothers." Pebblepaw nodded and inclined his head respectfully.

"Hello, nice to meet you." Hawkpaw held back a laugh, *he's so formal.*

Snakepaw must of been thinking the same thing because she saw his whiskers twitch with amusement before mewing, "You too."

The chatting died down as Morningstar leapt onto the oak tree and

yowled for silence. Hawkpaw seated herself beside Pebblepaw and Snakepaw, watching her leader begin the Gathering.

"Thunderclan is well, prey is plentiful and Daisypelt has had a litter of two kits. With greenleaf here, we're expecting the nursery to fill up shortly. Sadly, we are mourning the death of Sorrelbreeze, a noble warrior and great mother." Morningstar slanted his gaze over to Inkstar. "We found her corpse by the ShadowClan border and hope she made it safely to StarClan." Most of the cats below murmured soft prayers for her mother, but the ShadowClan warriors bristled their fur up in aggravation.

Morningstar slunk back and Inkstar stepped forward, his jet-black pelt slightly spiked up. "ShadowClan is thriving. We have a new warrior, Russetclaw." Meows of shock erupted among the Clans as ShadowClan warriors glanced at one another uneasily. Hawkpaw heard a lot of growls of uncertainty.

"I don't remember a ShadowClan apprentice named Russetpaw, how is that possible?"

"Did I miss something? I didn't know of any Russetpaw or Russetkit."

"This is strange. Do you think ShadowClan took in a kittypet?"

"No way! ShadowClan despises those pampered Twoleg fiends."

"What about a rogue?"

Hawkpaw extended her neck to try to look over the sea of heads, straining her eyes and spotted a shaggy, ginger clouded tabby tom with white socks, a tail tip, and muzzle. He caught her gaze and glared back, his amber eyes glowing. She gulped and slumped back down.

"Quiet! We are also lamenting for our warrior Berrypelt, who died only recently and had an unexpected death." Inkstar glowered at Morningstar. "He was found in his nest with multiple wounds and scratches, and my warriors detected *ThunderClan's* scent on his shredded pelt."

Morningstar roared furiously, "do you dare to blame ThunderClan for your Clanmates death?"

"I don't know, you tell me why your Clan's filthy stench covered him!"

"He was probably the cat who murdered Sorrelbreeze and was still bathed in her scent."

"Are saying my warriors kill without reason?"

"They seemed to have had that mindset when you attacked our camp and murdered Fallengaze!" Tension sparked between the Clans and her Clanmates began spitting at ShadowClan.

"You fleabags! Good riddance that he died, that cat was a fox-heart to begin with."

"Don't you mock Berrypelt, he was a noble and young warrior!"

"So was Fallengaze and Sorrelbreeze!"

Hawkpaw shrunk back in her pelt, terrified. *What if they find out it was me who killed Berrypelt? They can't, right?* The stars and the moon seemed to cower behind a dense layer of cloud that rolled in all of a sudden. All of the cats in the clearing looked up and stopped fighting.

"Look, you made StarClan angry! This Gathering is over!" Yellowstar yowled. The Clans began to disperse and Hawkpaw frantically looked for the group of her Clanmates. She saw Lightningmask and jumped towards him, thankful to be out of the suffocating swarm of cats.

"Hey, are you okay?" he asked seeing her distressed face.

"Yeah, I'm fine now. Just startled."

He rubbed against her, "Come on, let's not be left behind." She noticed that their Clan was leaving already and she bounded after them, Lightningmask beside her. Hawkpaw caught up to her mentor and trotted next to her.

"Why was ShadowClan accusing us?"

"Because they are mouse-hearted and don't take responsibility for themselves, and always blame everyone else for their problems. No one likes ShadowClan except ShadowClan," She snarled. Hawkpaw stifled a laugh figuring it wasn't a good time to try to make light of the situation. Back at the camp, the Clan was slumbering already.

Flareheart yawned and meowed to Ravenpelt, "Do you mind to guard the entrance tonight?"

"Sure, goodnight." Flareheart bowed and headed for the warriors' den while the sleek, black tom sat beside the tunnel. Hawkpaw flopped down on her nest, careful not to disturb Rabbitpaw or Applepaw. She almost immediately fell asleep.

"Hello again, little one." Thistleclaw purred. "The Gathering tonight put you in a dangerous position, you did well to remain undetected. I'm very proud of you, now we can move on to more formidable moves."

Hawkpaw flexed her claws excitedly, "Like what?"

"The killing bite. It's a death blow to the back of the neck, quick and silent. The Clan cats consider it dishonorable and use it only as a last resort, but they're just afraid of such a powerful technique. Now, watch closely."

Her eyes widened, "you're going to show me?"

"Of course, pay attention." Hawkpaw screeched in shock as Thistleclaw slammed into her, knocking her sideways. Two heavy paws clamped down onto her shoulders, and iron jaws closed around the back of his neck. "Murr-oww!" she grunted. If he were to sink his fangs too deep, it would all be over, but Thistleclaw moved back allowing her to get up. She shook out her pelt and screwed up her face.

"That seems hard."

"Don't complain," he growled.

She tossed her head back, "I'm not." He snorted with disbelief and flicked his tail.

"Go on then." She copied him to the best of her ability, feeling pleased when she had concluded it.

"Not bad, keep going."

After a while she had to stop and held her head low, wheezing for breath. "I need a break. I'm too tired to continue."

"Do you think an enemy will give you a moment to let you catch your breath?" he snarled.

"I don't think any cat in theit right mind would fight this long," she retorted.

"Alright, then we'll carry on tomorrow night and I'll make sure you train twice as hard than today."

"What? That's not fair!"

"War isn't fair," with that he faded from her dream and she awoke abruptly. Her muscles screamed from the intense conditioning and her pads were cracked badly.

"Great," she muttered. It was already morning so she padded out to the medicine cat's den and was surprised when she nearly tripped over Fuzzykit who was sniffing some herbs. "What are you doing in here, Dazedkit? Duckfeather will get upset if he finds you." She only blinked innocently at her just as the medicine cat entered the room. He glanced down at Fuzzyit but didn't say a thing and only meowed:

"What do you need, Hawkpaw?" Her jaw dropped open. Duckfeather wasn't mad that a kit was going through his herbs?

"Er, my pads are cracked."

"Does it hurt?"

"Not terribly."

He turned to the kit, "fetch some marigold and dock. Do you know where they are?" Fuzzykit nodded and scuttled away to the back of the cave to Hawkpaw's astonishment. She came back with the plants and dropped them at his paws. Duckfeather chewed them up before saying in a gruff voice, "give me your paw." He applied the poultice to her sores.

She examined them, "thank you." Duckfeather flicked his ear and took the leftover herbs back.

She walked outside when a shrill screech pierced the air, "Attack!" A flurry of soft paws pounced on her and she staggered dramatically, wincing as she felt tiny claws prick her skin. Collapsing under the weight of Daisypelt's two kits, she sank grunting to the ground and writhed like a captured snake. The kits squealed as she flung them back and forth, tugging her fur in an effort to cling on.

"I surrender, please spare me!" she begged.

"I don't know, should we, Cherrykit?" Softkit, a cream she-cat with a dark brown face, ears, paws and tail mewed.

"Never!" The calico she-cat bit her ear, and Hawkpaw groaned in fake pain.

"Okay you two, leave poor Hawkpaw alone." Daisypelt called from the nursery and her kits grumbled as they climbed down her.

"Hawkpaw, can you tell us a story?" Cherrykit squeaked.

"Yeah! I want to hear one!" Softkit chimed in. Fuzzykit wandered over then and stared up at her with her big eyes. She scowled at her but agreed nonetheless.

"Let's go in the nursery at least so we don't bother anyone."

"Okay!" She squeezed in after the eager kits and laid down, tucking her paws underneath her body.

"Now this story is about a foolish apprentice." All of the kits were listening attentively. "This apprentice was not satisfied with the life

he had in his Clan, you see," meowed Hawkpaw. "Instead of being with his Clanmates, fighting and hunting, he wanted to do something else."

"What did he want to do?" asked Cherrykit.

"He wanted to fly," Hawkpaw raised her paw and drew it in an arc in the air.

"But that is impossible only *birds* can do that," Softkit cheeped indignantly.

"The apprentice knew that only birds could fly so he came up with a plan," mewed Hawkpaw. "While he was out hunting in the forest he spotted a pair of crows."

"Did he kill them and bring them to feed his Clan?" Cherrykit inquired.

"He should have, but instead he walked up to them and asked them a question."

"You can talk to crows?" Fuzzykit interrupted.

No, only in stories you can." She sighed in irritation, *must they keep talking over me?*

"What did he ask?"

"He meowed, 'Hey crows, can you help me fly? I have seen you do it.'"

"What did the crows say?"

"If shut up you'd know," Softkit hissed at her sister and she purred.

"The crows immediately saw that this apprentice was an unwise one. But they decided to humor him. They said, 'Sure, what do you want us to do?' The apprentice instructed the crows to grab on each end of a stick thick enough so it wouldn't break under his weight. The crows did as they were told seeing the apprentice wouldn't kill them. The apprentice then bit down on the middle of the stick and

told the crows to flap their wings as hard as they could," Hawkpaw meowed.

"Did he do it? Did he really fly?" Fuzzykit leaned forward.

"Yes, he did," explained Hawkpaw. "The apprentice felt himself being lifted off the ground and into the air, going high into the sky, higher than any other cat had ever gone."

"Wow," mewled Cherrykit.

She continued, "a passing thrush caught sight of the unusual scene. The songbird chirped in surprise at the apprentice, 'Well this must certainly be the leader of all cats!' Feeling a bit proud at his accomplishment, the apprentice opened his mouth to boast of the fact that he was the leader, but as he did so he suddenly found himself plummeting to the ground because he had let go of the stick."

"Oh, no!" said all the kits in unison.

"See what this teaches us? You must not brag of even the greatest of your achievements; and I can see that you guys will accomplish a lot when you all grow up and become warriors." *Although I do have the most impressive destiny of all.* "Now, go to sleep, little ones."

"Aww, but we're not tired," Softkit tried to escape but Daisypelt came in then.

"Nice try, but Hawkpaw's right. You need a nap." Softkit huffed as her mother picked her up by the scruff and placed her in their nest, doing the same to Cherrykit who was hiding behind Fuzzykit. Hawkpaw purred and got up, bowing to the queen.

"I'm going to go now."

"Thank you for telling them that tale, it was very nice of you." Daisypelt mewed as she crept in the nest with her kits.

"Anytime. See ya!"

Outside, Hawkpaw saw Duckfeather whisper something to

Morningstar in his ear, and indicated Owlpelt by casting a glance at the brown queen. Morningstar nodded and Duckfeather slunk over to Owlpelt and ushered her to the leader's den. She watched in confusion, *was something happening?* After a moment, the threesome came back out and Morningstar called a clan meeting, Owlpelt beaming excitedly. Hawkpaw sat down, waiting for the announcement as he yowled, "Duckfeather has something he'd like to declare. Duckfeather," the white calico stepped back as he replaced him.

"Cats of ThunderClan, as you know, I will not be around forever. So it's time I took an apprentice. I have chosen a cat who has shown intelligence and enthusiasm to learn. Your next medicine cat will be Fuzzy*paw*."

Whispers of surprise were uttered from the Clan as Morningstar said, "Fuzzypaw, do you accept the post of apprentice to Duckfeather?"

"I do."

"Then at the half-moon tomorrow, you must travel to the Moonpool to be accepted by StarClan before the other medicine cats," meowed Duckfeather.

"The good wishes of all of ThunderClan will go with you." Duckfeather slowly walked down to Fuzzypaw who was frozen still and touched noses with her, the Clan erupted into congratulations and started greeting the new apprentice. Only Hawkpaw hung back, glowering at her Clanmates. *So what? Have they never seen an apprentice before? Just because Dazedpaw is training to become a medicine cat doesn't make her any more special. What about me, I am going to lead all the cats one day!*

Flareheart cut in the cheers, "I need three patrols to go to each Clan and tell their Medicine cats about this, so they travel to the Moonpool as well to witness her apprenticeship. Moonface will lead the first one to WindClan with Cloudchaser, Gentleleaf and Rabbitpaw. Tallwhisker will lead the second patrol to ShadowClan with Hawkpaw and Webfur, please be careful though. ShadowClan is still upset with us and we don't need any more complications.

Also, I'd like Lavenderstripe to take the last group down to RiverClan with Brighteyes, Ravenpelt and Raindapple ."

Hawkpaw's head shot up at the mention of her name. She had to go to ShadowClan? She shivered at the thought, horror stirring in her. *I can't go!* She hurried over to Flareheart and whispered, "I am *really* tired, I don't think I should go on a patrol."

She gave her a quizzical look and mewed, "I want you to go since it'd be a nice experience for you to learn from. It will be the perfect test to see if you can control your anger. So you better not come back shredded," she half-joked and Hawkpaw frowned, *Thank you for that, Flareheart.* "If you're so tired, go ask Duckfeather for some herbs to help you stay awake. Good luck!" she crooned.

Hawkpaw sighed, *this is not going to end well.*

"Hawkpaw! Come on, don't waste daylight!" She stomped over and trailed behind Tallwhisker and Webfur. They stopped at the scent line and Tallwhisker bent down to sniff it. "A ShadowClan patrol has just came by here, we can still catch up to them. We'd better hurry." He picked up the speed as they traveled down the border.

They were nearing the edge of the border when a light brown tabby jumped out, hissing and spitting. "Thundercats! What are you doing so close to our territory? Trying to attack us?" His thin body was heaving as he shook with anger.

"Calm down, Raggedflame. We wish to speak with your medicine cat."

"Whitewater? Why?" He narrowed his blue eyes in disgust.

"Duckfeather has taken an apprentice and it is required that the other medicine cats journey to the Moonpool to attend their ceremony."

Raggedflame remained tense as if he were going to attack at any moment, but scoffed, "fine. My patrol will escort you," he rippled his tail and three other cats slunk out of the shadows. She immediately made out Sandfur and Brindlespots, but she didn't

know the third. He was a well built tom with a black coat and white ears, spots on his rumpand tail.

"Who is that?" Hawkpaw hissed to Webfur.

"That's Wildthorn. He was Berrypelt's mentor, so I suspect he's not going to ever admit it wasn't us who was the cause of his death." The tom was glaring with amber eyes making Hawkpaw gulp. *But it* was *ThunderClan who killed his apprentice.*

The warriors flocked around them and she bristled, trying to look bigger. Webfur shook his head and she took a deep breath, forcing her fur to lie flat. *I need to stay calm, don't make it obvious. Just act normal.* The border patrol encircled them and guided them towards their camp. As soon as Hawkpaw passed the scent line, she gagged as the stench of ShadowClan overwhelmed her along with pine sap. *How can they live here? It's so dark and filthy.* She had to blink a few times before her eyes adjusted to the light. They were led through the shadowy forest, needles softening her pawsteps. The fresh-scented pine boughs swayed above her head. The rough, dark bark that coated its wood dripped rosin in a few places where woodpeckers had been, a few snapped branches lying around her.

Hawkpaw nearly missed the ShadowClan camp as Raggedflame dove through a thorn tunnel. She had to admit they concealed it well between the tangles of brambles and low-hanging branches. She followed him into a dip beneath the pine trees, bursting right into the heart of ShadowClan where a collection of cats awaited her Clanmates. She cowered at the sight of them, her nerves spiked up.

Raggedflame faced them and growled, "wait here." He padded under a large bramble thicket leaving herself and her Clanmates surrounded by hostile cats. Hawkpaw sighed and looked up at a hazel branch overhanging the camp.

She saw a dark gray kit poke his head out of their nursery and he squeaked in alarm, "Mommy! ThunderClan is here!"

A black-and-gray spotted queen grabbed her kit, "don't go outside, Sootkit!" She glanced over at Hawkpaw and ducked back inside with her son. Hawkpaw spotted a ginger clouded tom sitting in the

corner of the camp by himself and a name ran through her head. *Russetclaw.* He caught her staring and narrowed his eyes. She looked away but thought, *there's definitely something strange about that cat. Why is he secluded even with his Clanmates?* At that moment, Inkstar appeared and leaped onto a branch hanging over his den. His cold gaze swept over her and her Clanmates.

"Why do you wish to speak to Whitewater?" Hawkpaw snarled in frustration, *didn't that stupid warrior tell him the reason? Why are they so skeptical? We should be the ones who don't trust them for taking the lives of two of our warriors!*

Tallwhisker bowed his head, "Duckfeather has taken an apprentice and as of custom, all the medicine cat's must travel to the Moonpool on the half-moon which happens to be tomorrow."

"Do you expect our medicine cat to be prepared on such short notice? I'm not sure if I am able to allow her to go with you." Hawkpaw gaped, *he can't do that!*

Just then, Whitewater prowled over from her den. She noticed that the medicine den had a sandy, hollowed-out floor covered in dried pine needles. "I will go, Inkstar. There isn't much to prepare for, my herbs are already well-stocked."

Inkstar glanced at her, "are you sure about this? You don't have to go."

"I would like to see the cat brave enough to train under Duckfeather," she snorted.

"Very well. Tell Morningstar that Whitewater will be coming along with Eaglepaw," Inkstar yowled before hopping down.

Raggedflame came back and growled, "we'll be making sure you leave." They were accompanied back to ThunderClan terrain and Hawkpaw welcomed the deciduous woods delightedly, thankful to be away from the dark pine forest. Tallwhisker led the way away from the patrol watching them leave.

"I think that went pretty well," Webfur laughed.

Tallwhisker sighed, "I don't know how a Clan can be so malicious like that."

"I think their faces got stuck with a permanent scowl on their face."

"Apparently." Hawkpaw purred and entered her own camp. Lightningmask bounded over.

"How did it go? Did you get in a fight?" He sounded excited with a hint of worry and Hawkpaw giggled.

"Oh, it was great. They were so pleased to see us after all," she joked.

"Really?"

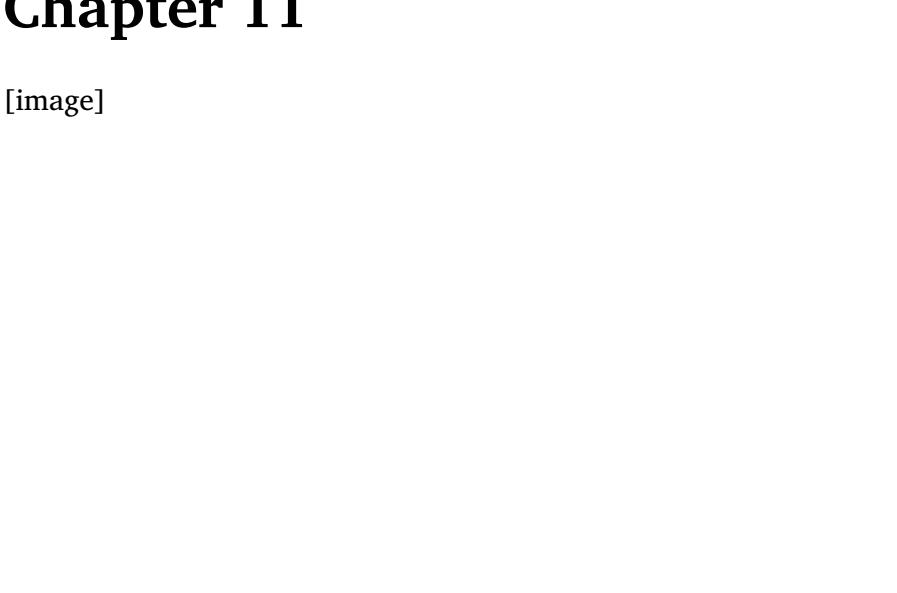
"No! I was being sarcastic!"

Lightningmask ducked his head in embarrassment, "I knew that, I was just kidding."

"Sure," she mewed slowly. *At least I wasn't discovered in the end, that would have been bad.*

That night, Hawkpaw couldn't fall asleep. She kept seeing Berrypelt's maimed figure whenever she closed her eyes, his blood still on her paws no matter how much she cleaned them. She whimpered, *why is that even after accepting my other half, I am still haunted by his death?*

Chapter 11



"Stop!" Thistleclaw yowled.

"But I haven't perfected it yet!" Hawkpaw lunged forward again, her belly brushing the ground. She twisted, thrusting out her hind paws with a grunt of effort as she bit down, pretending to sink her teeth in an enemy's' neck.

Thistleclaw ignored her. "Stop!"

"I have to get this right." Hawkpaw scrambled to her paws. "I need to become strong as soon as possible."

"You must wake up, Hawkpaw," Thistleclaw hissed. "Something's happening." She stared at him in alarm. "Wake *up*!"

She blinked open her eyes. She scrabbled up, heart racing. The apprentices' den was pitch-black so that she could hardly see the walls. Her denmates were nowhere to be find. Paws pricking, she slipped into the clearing and looked up at the sky. Dawn was lightning the top of the tall cliffs, the moon no more than a claw scratch. In front of the nursery, Sparrowclaw was pacing back and forth nervously. *Raindapple is kitting!* The warrior had moved into

the nursery a little while ago with a kit-swollen belly, her second litter to Sparrowclaw. She saw Lightningmask and Moonface watching their father, motionless as they sat side by side. She trotted over to them.

"I can't believe you guys are going to be big brothers, are you excited?"

"Of course!" Lightningmask meowed. "I'm just worried about Raindapple."

"Oh please, she had to kit you two."

Moonface twitched his whiskers, "what's that supposed to mean?"

"You already know the answer to that." She winked and Lightningmask playfully shoved her.

Applepaw came over with her littermates, "why is the Clan so worked up?"

Snakepaw yawned, "I already told you! Raindapple is kitting."

"So?"

"It's not every day that new life is given to us," explained Moonface.

Applepaw screwed up his face in concentration. "Don't overthink it," Rabbitpaw purred.

Fuzzypaw trotted past them then, borage leaves hanging from her mouth. Moonface stopped her, "How is she?"

"Fine, Duckfeather's with her." She ducked into the nursery while Lightningmask growled.

"That doesn't make me feel any better." Hawkpaw stifled a laugh.

A screech sounded, making the talking cease. Another small, pained cry echoed from inside, followed by a weak mewling. Sparrowclaw who was tense with agitation and worry poked his head in only to be shoved out by Duckfeather who shouldered past and snorted at

the tom. "Raindapple has birthed a healthy she-kit." A sigh of relief went around the Clan as Sparrowclaw asked:

"How is Raindapple?"

"She's fine, just exhausted from the difficult kitting."

Sparrowclaw narrowed his eyes, "difficult?"

"Yeah, your kit's stubborn just like you. You may go in but make it short, she needs rest. I gave her borage leaves to help with the milk supply so she'll be tired." Sparrowclaw didn't wait any longer, he squeezed inside and Hawkpaw felt a prickle of curiosity. She slunk to the entrance and peeked inside.

A tired Raindapple was lying in her nest, a gray kit suckling at her belly. She purred, "let's name her Mosskit, for her fur is soft like moss." Sparrowclaw smiled and nuzzled his mate, bending down to lick their new daughter.

Cherrykit and Softkit were being held back by Daisypelt's tail, peering over their mother at the new kit. "What is that thing?"

"That's your new denmate, so be nice to her," Daisypelt purred.

Softkit wrinkled her nose, "she stinks."

"Shush, go back to sleep." Hawkpaw backed up and found Lightningmask and Moonface right behind her.

"So?" they asked in unison.

"You have a cute little sister," she mewed, her eyes twinkling as they smiled weakly.

Early-morning sunlight streamed down onto the forest floor as Hawkpaw roamed in search of prey. She paused to sniff the earth and the cold blind things that moved within it. Now that greenleaf was fully here, leaves were thick on the branches and tiny creatures were busy beneath the carpet of leaf mold. Hawkpaw made a lean, strong shape as she moved silently through the trees, all her senses alert for prey that she might come across. Today was her first solo

task and she was determined to do well, even if it was only to bring prey back to the Clan.

The stench of dog laid heavy in the air by the Twoleg campgrounds. The smell was stale so it must have been going on a walk with a Twoleg. Flareheart had taught her the scent of dog, but apart from the barking from the distant moor, she had never seen one properly. She struggled to screen out the scent of the dog and concentrate on prey. Suddenly her whiskers prickled as she homed in on the warm blood-beat of prey - a magpie busy about cleaning its plumage.

A heartbeat later she saw the magpie. The bird was plump, making her mouth water in anticipation. Dropping in a crouch, Hawkpaw began to stalk the little creature. Her tan belly fur brushed against the damp grass. She crept closer, her eyes never leaving the prey. She was almost there, another moment and she would be near enough to spring.

Suddenly there was a loud rustle in the ferns behind her. The magpie's head popped up and it shot into the air, it's shrill warning carried in the air. Hawkpaw hissed and felt her hackles rising. Whatever disturbed her first good chance of catching prey was going to have to pay.

She sniffed the air. She could tell it was a cat, but couldn't distinguish which Clan it belonged to - the stale scent of dog still confusing her smell-sense. *What if it's an enemy?* A growl rose in her throat as she began doubling back in a wide circle, pricking her ears and widening her eyes to seek out any movement. It was becoming louder, off to one side. Hawkpaw edged closer. She could see the ferns moving, but the fronds still hid the enemy from view. A twig snapped with a sharp cracking noise. *From the noise it's making, it must be big,* she thought as she prepared herself for a fierce battle. She hid behind the trunk of an ash and held her breath, watching as the invisible warrior came closer and closer still.

"Gr-aaar!" The battle cry rumbled in Hawkpaw's throat. Claws unsheathed, she launched herself at the warrior and dug her thorn-sharp claws in their shoulders. They gave a yelp of surprise and rolled onto their back in an attempt to dislodge their attacker. She rolled with them, squashed and flattened beneath the heavy body.

The familiar scent of Lightningmask washed over her then.

"L-Lightningmask? Whoa!" He sprang up and nipped at her growling, but stopped when he saw it was her.

"Hawkpaw? What are doing, you nearly shredded me!" Lightningmask grumbled as he twisted his head around to lick his sore shoulders. She got up and shook off the dirt on her pelt.

"Sorry," Hawkpaw mumbled. "I was hunting a magpie until you startled it with your creeping up on me."

His eyes widened, "creeping? That was my best stealth crouch!"

She snorted in disbelief. "Stealth! You were more like a crooked badger." She flattened her ears playfully.

Lightningmask gave a hiss of delight, "I'll show you crooked!"

The two cats leaped at each other and began rolling over and over in a play-fight. Lightningmask swiped at Hawkpaw with a hefty paw and the apprentice's head buzzed with stars. She shook her head to clear it and then launched a counterattack. Lightningmask managed to get a few paw strikes before she overpowered him, pinning him to the ground. She pricked her claws on his stomach making him laugh.

"Hey, that tickles!"

She blinked at him with innocently with big eyes. "What does, this?" She tickled him some more making him howl with laughter.

"I give up, I give up. Please stop," he breathed heavily.

"I win!" she crowed. She jumped nimbly off the warrior and began squirming around in the leaf litter, enjoying her easy victory and warmth of the earth against her back. *I am getting stronger!* Lightningmask seemed unbothered by his defeat and started washing his paws.

"So, how do you like your sister?"

Lightningmask looked up, "You mean, Mosskit? I haven't been able to play with her lately but she's cool. I wish I could spend more time with her."

"She's lucky to have someone like you as her brother," she purred and he licked his chest fur bashfully.

"Yeah, I guess. Since I made you lose that magpie, I can help out if you like."

"It doesn't matter," Hawkpaw mewed. "I'll find another. It's such a warm day, there should be plenty of prey bustling about."

"True. But you still have to catch them," he meowed thoughtfully. She gave a tiny nod and heard her belly grumble.

"I suppose it wouldn't hurt to have some assistance."

"Come on then!" Hawkpaw followed Lightningmask, glad for the company and help. As she predicted, hunting was good that day. Before long, Lightningmask had pounced on a small mouse and Hawkpaw caught a blackbird and plump wren.

"Good job!" he purred as she trotted over with her catches. "Here, take my mouse and go back, you can say you got this too. I was never here." He winked and she laughed around the feathers in her mouth. She picked up the mouse and dipped her head.

"See you later," she meowed and trekked onward lighthearted. *My first solo mission was a success!*

As she sweeped past the tunnel, Cherrykit and Softkit raced towards her, almost making her drop the fresh-kill.

"Wow! Look at all that! Can we have some?" Softkit wound around her legs with kitten-soft fur.

"I think you're too young yet," she said around the prey. "excuse me." She let go of the birds onto the pile, the heap up to her chest. She kept the mouse and walked over to the elders' den. Muffled mews sounded from inside and Hawkpaw strained her ears to hear.

"Would you like me to remove your ticks, Robinpelt?" Fuzzypaw's voice squeaked.

"No, I want to be bitten by pesky bugs till the day I die. Of course I want these vermin removed! Thank you, kit."

"I'm an apprentice," she muttered under her breath loud enough for Hawkpaw to hear. She stooped down and slithered inside, laying the mouse down.

"I brought you guys some fresh-kill."

"Thank you, Hawkpaw. That was very thoughtful of you," Hightail rasped and starting chewing on the critter.

"Yuck! I don't like mice, I'd rather eat a bird!" Robinpelt grunted and she saw Fuzzypaw cringe. "Birds are so much more...Mrrrowww!" He suddenly howled in pain. "Be more gentle, kit!"

"Sorry, that tick was a nasty one," Fuzzypaw twitched her ear. *What's her deal?*

"So, Dazedpaw, are you ready to go to the Moonpool tonight?"

Fuzzypaw brightened up, "yeah! I'm so thrilled that I get to become a medicine cat!" She wasn't bugged by Hawkpaw's tease at all which got under her skin. *Why doesn't she react to the name I give her?*

"Well, since you haven't technically been made an apprentice yet, I think you should still be called Dazedkit," Hawkpaw said roughly.

"Well Duckfeather announced that I was Fuzzy*paw*, so I think it's okay."

"I don't know about that. Are you sure you're even six moons old? You're the size of a newborn!"

"That's true, Owlpelt says I'll stay a kit forever," Fuzzypaw giggled. Hawkpaw grinded her teeth in annoyance and swept outside, sick of the brat. *Ugh! That Dazedpaw is so dense and...and...a mouse-brain! It's no fun to pick on her if she won't oppose my attempts to provoke her.*

I hate *that cat.*

Hawkpaw sat down with a huff by the apprentice's den and furiously nibbled at a front claw, stripping off a piece of the outer sheath. Her littermates joined, Applepaw at their heels. She noticed that Applepaw was hanging around Rabbitpaw lately, obviously becoming close friends. She felt a pang of jealousy, but also happiness for her brother to have such a nice friend.

"So, who ruffled your fur?" Snakepaw nudged her, oak leaves wrapped around his leg.

"Daz-er, Fuzzypaw." She thought for a moment. "It was odd though, she was acting strange when Robinpelt starting talking about birds."

Rabbitpaw stiffened, "Really?"

"Yeah, why?"

"One sunrise ago, I had found this starling with a missing wing in a nest that was hidden behind the nursery and I decided to kill it," he meowed. "I was just starting to eat my find when Fuzzypaw shoved me away from my fresh-kill and was screaming at me like a lunatic. She was like, 'You killed her, you killed Star!' It was so odd. Of course I killed the bird, it was prey!"

Snakepaw and Applepaw were laughing while Hawkpaw snorted, "I guess she snapped already, she sounds crazier than a fox in a fit!"

"I bet it's because of Duckfeather, he's already insane."

"Insane and moody," Applepaw giggled. Hawkpaw purred with amusement, pleased to be goofing off with her siblings and friend. *I could stay like this forever!*

Chapter 12

[image]

"Thistleclaw? Thistleclaw!" Hawkpaw raced through the dark forest. Earth sprayed behind her as she barged through the tangled overgrowth. *Where is he? I need to train!*

"Faster!" A sharp growl sliced through the mist. "Again! Do you want to die at the paws of an average warrior?" Hawkpaw heard a thud of hard muscle hitting the ground. *What's going on? Is someone else here to train like me?* Ears pricked, she inched forward and ducked behind a thornbush. As the fog swirled away, she saw numerous cats moving in a broad clearing. She watched as a dark tabby tom swung a hefty paw at another tom who was nearly twice his size. The other cat evaded his blow and was on the tom in an instant, battering his head with a flurry of paws. Hawkpaw gasped as blood sprayed from the torn fur. The tom wriggled free and met his attacker with vicious, slicing jabs. Hawkpaw furrowed her brows, knowing there was something familiar with the broad shoulders of the tabby. In a flash, she recognized him. *Tideclaw! What is the RiverClan deputy doing here? Better yet, what are all these cats doing here?*

She barely recognized any of them apart from Sharkpaw, Brindlespots and Maplepaw. Hawkpaw shivered at the tortoiseshell apprentice who had attacked her Clan, a feeling of despair and fear streaming through her body.

"Better," the long-haired tom growled. He had a brown clouded

tabby pelt that was laced with slash marks and shimmering stars.

"Thanks, Mudfang." Tideclaw staggered back into the rank of cats.

"Who's next?" Hawkpaw didn't stick around to find out, she pelted away before crashing into her mentor.

"Thistleclaw," she gasped.

"Where are you off to in such a hurry? I was looking for you." She glanced behind her and his gaze darkened. "What did you see?"

She shuffled her paws, "Um, not much. Just...other cats."

He barged past her, "Come with me." She swallowed back her fear and reluctantly trailed after him. They plunged into the clearing, startling the warriors and making them look up. Maplepaw curled her lip upon seeing her but didn't say anything.

Mudfang bowed his head deeply, "Thistleclaw. What brings you here? Furthermore," he meowed while lifting his eyes. "Who is that?" Hawkpaw felt her pelt burn from all the stares.

"*She* is the destined cat, Hawkpaw."

Another dark tabby with a long scar across his face stepped forward and scoffed, "Her? She's the one? She's just a scrawny apprentice." Murmurs of agreement rippled among them.

"Nettleclaw, watch your mouth," Thistleclaw warned the dead cat.

"I could take her on," Maplepaw smirked.

"If I'm not mistaken, you were already beaten by her," mewed Sharkpaw.

"Why is an apprentice the fated one, but not me, a full grown warrior?" An orange calico she-cat protested.

"Everyone quiet down!" Thistleclaw roared. "You were chosen trainees to be her supporters. Feel honored that we even picked this pathetic lot!" The warriors growled but didn't speak against him. *Is*

Thistleclaw the leader of StarClan? That would be so cool!

"Now, continue with your training as Hawkpaw and I oversee it." The cats resumed their positions while grumbling.

Hawkpaw flinched as Thistleclaw hissed in her ear, "these warriors are *your* pawns. Feel free to do what you will with them, they're loyalty belongs to you and you alone. We are merely shaping them up for you, so get to know their strengths and weaknesses. Every cat has them." Hawkpaw gave a timid nod and watched.

"What are their names? All I know is Tideclaw, Maplepaw, Sharkpaw and Brindlespots."

Thistleclaw nodded, "I'm glad you're enthusiastic to learn already. Well, that bracken colored tom with the striped tail is Eeltail, a warrior in RiverClan. Leopardpelt is the spotted brown tom, while his Clanmate Spottedfire is that she-cat." he flicked his tail at the calico that spoke up earlier. "They both belong to WindClan along with Brownpaw, that tom over there." he nodded to a brown cat who was clawing the air. *I remember Pebblepaw talking about him at that Gathering,* she mused. *All these cats seem really tough! I hope they will actually listen to me.*

"I'm not sure how to lead them."

"Don't worry, you'll learn and I'll be by your side to help," he purred and wound around her. "You should go back to your Clan now, they're waking up."

She coiled her claws as she rolled her shoulders. "Okay. Bye then!"

Hawkpaw felt a paw prodding her side, "Wake up, sleepyslug." She moaned and got up.

"What time is it?"

"A little past sunup," Rabbitpaw meowed.

"Did dawn patrol leave already?"

"Yeah, don't worry. You weren't chosen."

"Good." She smoothed her fur with a few laps and stretched. "Let's go outside." They trotted out of the cave and she squinted at the sudden brightness. The Clan was already bustling about and were grooming each other while sharing the latest gossip in the usual groups.

"I'm going to share tongues with, Applepaw. See you." Hawkpaw waved her tail and decided to look for Lightningmask. *He always has good gossip.* She found him digging in the fresh-kill pile and tackled him playfully, purring as he squealed dramatically.

"Come share tongues with me," she begged pleadingly.

"Okay, okay. But you got to get off first, you're too heavy!"

"Are you saying I'm fat," she gasped in mock offense.

"I can't answer that," he chuckled and she swiped his ear before hopping off. He laid beneath some fronds to stay cool in the shadows and she began grooming him.

"Did Duckfeather and Fuzzypaw get back from the Moonpool yet?"

"Nope. I haven't see them since last night when we escorted them to the border and met up with the other medicine cats. By the way, is it just me or is Eaglepaw really jumpy? We just sauntered over and he nearly leapt out of his fur!" Hawkpaw laughed, recalling the skittish ShadowClan apprentice.

"He is rather high-strung."

"Poor kittenhood?"

"Who knows."

At that moment, Cedarbelly yowled, "I hear someone coming!" All the cats sprung to their paws, pelts spiked up as they eyed the entrance. The thorn tunnel rustled and...

Duckfeather padded inside with a weary Fuzzypaw. Hawkpaw exhaled slowly.

"That old flea-brain nearly gave me a heart attack. I thought we were being attacked," grumbled Lightningmask. Hawkpaw twitched her whiskers and surveyed the Clan. Everyone was gathering around the two cats, meowing excitedly. *Geez, she becomes an apprentice and it's the biggest thing since the Clans formed,* Hawkpaw sulked.

Fuzzypaw spotted her and her blue eyes widened. She approached her, awe and fear reflecting in her eyes.

"Hawkpaw, I..."

"Don't brag, Dazedpaw. I'll be going to the Moonpool soon enough, so don't get cocky!" she snapped.

She shook her head, worry edging her mew. "That's not what I wanted to say. It's about the..."

"Just leave me alone!" She whipped around with a snarl and stalked to the fresh-kill pile. She pawed at it, not hungry but only wanting to escape Fuzzypaw. *How come that kit goes to the Moonpool on her second day of apprenticeship, but I'm already four moons in mine and still haven't visited it! Well, I already see StarClan every night so I guess it's not that big of a deal, but still! I'm never going to become a leader at this rate,* she sighed. *I wish Morningstar would just realize I'm the best and hurry up with my warrior ceremony.* She realized Fuzzypaw was still gawking at her, Lightningmask giving her a confused look and she hunched down. Even Duckfeather was giving her an odd expression. *Why is everyone staring at me?*

She glanced up at the sky and saw something strange with the clouds, almost like they were rimmed scarlet. Hawkpaw's mind swirled while her sight grew hazy, her eyelids feeling very heavy suddenly. She staggered backward, a buzzing in her conscious, her breaths shallow until she fell in a heap to the floor and everything fell into oozing, pitch-black darkness.

Chapter 13

[image]

The sharp tang of herbs wafted up her nostrils as Hawkpaw blearily blinked her eyes and groaned, seeing two round blue eyes peering down at her. She yelped in surprise and scrabbled backward, finding herself in a moss nest woven with soft feathers with an anxious Fuzzypaw hovering above her.

"Wha-what are you doing?" She stammered.

"Are you okay?" She mewed ignoring her question.

She curled her lip, "not after that. Why am I in the medicine cat's den anyways?"

Fuzzypaw sat back and traced the dirt with her paw, "well...you fainted this morning after Duckfeather and I returned from the Moonpool. It was really strange."

"Strange?" she echoed.

"Every time someone would get a rabbit length near you, your whole body starting spasming and you would screech furiously like you were being attacked. It took Tallwhisker, Sparrowclaw, Lavenderstripe and Lightningmask to drag you here." Hawkpaw felt her breath catch in her throat. *I was doing that? Why? Is there something wrong with me?*

Fuzzypaw noticed her frightened face and quickly meowed, "but don't worry! You're all right now!" She gave a nervous laugh and started towards the back of the den. "I'll fetch you some thyme and

poppy seeds. Be right back!" Hawkpaw frowned and was staring at her paws when Duckfeather came in with a wad of soaked moss. He laid it down in front of her and she flicked her ear before fervently drinking the water.

"Are you alright, Hawkpaw?"

"Yeah, I'm better now, thanks." He eyed her thoughtfully before heading over to a wall of the cave and arranging a supply of herbs. Fuzzypaw trotted back and dropped a bundle as she sorted through it.

"Let's see, start by eating these." She pushed several small, dusky green leaves on a brittle stem towards her. Hawkpaw reluctantly chewed on them, trying to hide her grimace from the sour taste. "Here are some poppy seeds as well," She nosed small black seeds to her and she lapped them up quietly, glad for the soothing herbs.

"Thank you, Dazedpaw," she muttered and saw Fuzzypaw fidget with glee. *Don't get so happy, it's a small compliment,* she growled in her head.

"Fuzzypaw, was that the last of our thyme supply?" Duckfeather meowed.

"Yeah, should I fetch more?"

"It's okay, I'll get some. There were some other herbs I want to gather anyways so I might be awhile. Can you manage until I get back?"

"Yup!" she smiled.

"I should hope so," he scowled. "Take care then. Make sure Hawkpaw has plenty to drink."

"Okay," Fuzzypaw hummed to herself happily as she sorted through a pile of leaves. *She is certainly a weird cat,* she thought to herself.

Hawkpaw laid her head on her paws, screwing her eyes shut as she tried to block out the sound of her Clanmates who were gossiping. *Ugh, why must they chatter like robins? I'll never rest with them!*

All of a sudden, an ear-splitting yowl reverberated around the hollow making her ears prick as she shot up. *What was that?* Lilyflower erupted from the thorn tunnel, her eyes round like two moons, startling the cats in the camp.

"Lilyflower? What's wrong?" Brighteyes mewed.

"Dogs! By the Twoleg Greenleaf campsite!"

"Dogs? How many?" Morningstar asked.

"I think only two but Cloudchaser is by himself fighting them off, he needs help!" she wheezed.

Daisypelt emerged from the nursery, Softkit and Cherrykit tumbling after her. Her voice shook with panic as she spoke, "Cloudchaser's alone? We have to help him now! He could get hurt."

"We will," Webfur assured her.

"That's right, he is our Clanmate, we won't abandon him." Ravenpelt meowed.

Softkit cocked her head, "what's happening?"

"Daisypelt?" Cherrykit squeaked.

"Come, little ones. Let's go back inside, everything's going to be okay," Raindapple murmured as she herded them in the nursery.

"What about, Daisypelt?"

"She will be coming shortly."

Hawkpaw dug her claws in the bed, *we lost too many cats already. I'm not letting StarClan take Cloudchaser too!*

"Let's go now. I want Sparrowclaw, Brighteyes, Gentleleaf, Ravenpelt and Moonface to come." Flareheart instructed and started for the entrance. Hawkpaw frantically got up but Fuzzypaw blocked her path.

"What are you trying to do? You can't fight now!"

"Get out of my way, I'm not injured," she snarled as she shouldered past the black-and-white she-cat.

"But you collapsed suddenly earlier and we don't know why, what if that happens again while you're fighting? You could become seriously wounded," she cried.

"I'll just have to take that chance. I am not letting anyone else die," she growled before bounding towards the battle party. "Wait for me!"

Flareheart twisted her head around and hesitated, "Hawkpaw? Are you sure you want to come?"

"Positive. I'm itching for a little action," she mewed.

Flareheart flicked her tail in acknowledgement. "Come along then. Remember everything you were taught and be careful." Hawkpaw nodded and eagerly followed the patrol, glancing back at Fuzzypaw who stared after them anxiously. She gave an apologetic smile before pushing through the tunnel. *Don't worry, Cloudchaser. We're on our way, just hold out a little longer. Don't forget about your family, they still need you.* She shuddered at the thought of Softkit and Cherrykit seeing their father torn apart, brutally killed by the dogs. She could not allow them to have a future like that, no one should suffer like how she and her littermates did.

The canopy of the trees were like clouds of green, rustling in the gentle breeze that kissed that leaves. A few falling leaves tumbled from the interlocking branches above, branches that grew so thickly only bright gaps of sunshine could break through. She sneezed as a tiny leaf drifted onto her nose, it's stem poking her eye. The woods were serenely quiet and calm, the melodious chorus of the birds whisked in the air.

Then, a barking sounded abruptly making Hawkpaw's pelt bristle as she quickened her pace. In a narrow clearing, two large dogs were snarling at Cloudchaser, his blood-stained sides heaving. They had long teeth that were jutting out of their mouths, their eyes burning

as they swung their massive heads towards the patrol. The smaller dog, a brown mutt, lowered its tail and let out a low guttural growl. The other dog barked and hurled forward, its thin black coat standing out against the forest. Hawkpaw's green eyes burned with determination, *I'm going to fend off these dogs for the sake of my Clanmates lives!*

"Attack!" Flareheart's yowl urged Hawkpaw on. She nimbly jumped out of the way and twisted in the air, landing squarely on its back as it landed. The dog ran around, trying to shake her off but she only tightened her grip and bit into its neck, making it whimper softly. Moonface and Sparrowclaw joined in, nipping at its legs. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Brighteyes help Cloudchaser hide in a nearby bush before leaping back into the battle. The others were fighting off the brown dog, its fear plain to see as they swiped at it.

The dog underneath Hawkpaw suddenly rammed against a tree, sending her flying into a rock and knocking the wind out of her lungs. She crumpled onto the dirt and lied on the ground, gasping for breath. The dog opened its jaws, saliva dripping from its fangs as it was about to snap them shut, but Sparrowclaw hopped in front of it and sliced his claws over its muzzle. Blood sprayed the grass and the dog swished its tail in irritation.

Flareheart's group managed to force the other dog back, its whines piercing the air before it ran away, yipping loudly. The black dog glanced up and snarled, cornered by the cats.

"Are you alright?" Gentleleaf asked worriedly.

"I'm good," Hawkpaw huffed as she struggled back up. "Just winded." She fluffed up her pelt to make herself look twice her size and arched her back, hissing at the intruder. Her Clanmates ferociously clawed the dog, its howls of pain echoing in her ears making her flatten them. She bit its paw sending it scrambling away and crashing through the bracken. Flareheart let out a yowl of triumph, the others joining her.

"We did it!" Moonface meowed.

"Pesky dogs," Ravenpelt growled and shook out his fur.

"Is everyone okay," Flareheart looked around.

"What about, Cloudchaser?" Gentleleaf fretted.

"I hid him in that bush over there," Brighteyes mewed. "He has some pretty bad wounds. He should be taken back immediately."

"I'll help carry him back," Sparrowclaw offered. Flareheart nodded and turned to Hawkpaw.

"Good job today. You fought bravely." Hawkpaw puffed out her chest.

"Thank you."

"Sparrowclaw, go get Cloudchaser and we can head home." The black tom ducked into the shrub, dragging Cloudchaser out by his scruff and Moonface hurriedly helped to haul him onto Sparrowclaw's back. They trudged back to camp, Sparrowclaw panting heavily from the extra weight on top of him.

As they came out of the tunnel, Daisypelt looked up and gasped, "Cloudchaser!" She raced over and started sniffing her mate fearfully.

"Let them through, Daisypelt. He needs to be treated by Duckfeather quickly." Brighteyes gently pushed back the cream she-cat with her tail. Hawkpaw saw Fuzzypaw poke her head out from the medicine cat's den and gulp.

"Where is Duckfeather?" Moonface asked.

"He's not back yet, I think he went out for herbs." Owlpelt answered nervously.

Hawkpaw padded over to the medicine cat's den and watched as Sparrowclaw gently laid down the wounded warrior on the cave floor.

"Fuzzypaw, can you manage to care for him?" he meowed.

She took a deep breath, "I have too. Duckfeather isn't here and I can't wait or else it'll be too late." Her round eyes scrunched shut for a moment before she spoke slowly. "I have to ask you to leave, I need to focus. Sorry, Sparrowclaw." He bowed his head before leaving. He glanced at Hawkpaw but just trotted past. Hawkpaw crept inside.

"Dazedpaw, you can't save Cloudchaser. You've barely had any experience!"

She shifted her gaze downward, "I don't have a choice. Trust me." Hawkpaw raised her eyebrows. *Dazedpaw sounds sure of herself, almost like she's been through this before. But that is impossible, so what is it about her?*

Fuzzypaw snatched some tall-stemmed, sharp-smelling thistles with dark leaves. She applied it to a bite on Cloudchaser's shoulder and Hawkpaw saw him wince. Fuzzypaw didn't hesitate as she chewed up comfrey, rubbing it on all his major wounds and swiftly covering them with cobwebs. *She actually seems to know what she is doing,* Hawkpaw admired despite feeling resentful towards the young apprentice. After a few minutes, Fuzzypaw had finished and sat back with a sigh.

"How are your wounds, Hawkpaw?" She was taken aback by the sudden question and completely forgot about herself from being distracted by the medicine cat apprentice working.

"Oh, just a few scratches. Nothing much," she meowed.

Fuzzypaw walked over and sniffed her pelt. "I might as well get you some dock just in case. I don't want any infections." She pawed at some leaves and crunched on them, gnawing them into a thick poultice. She smeared the herb on her grazes, Hawkpaw stretching her stiff muscles while she was spreading the dressing.

"There you go," Fuzzypaw mewed. Just then, Duckfeather darted inside the den, leaves hanging from his mouth. His gaze darted from Cloudchaser, to Fuzzypaw, to Hawkpaw and back to Fuzzypaw. He relaxed and dropped the herbs.

"I see you have things under control here. Well done," he said as Fuzzypaw purred.

"Thank you, Duckfeather!" The old tom grunted and checked Cloudchaser.

"He'll live, thank StarClan. Hawkpaw, could you calm down Daisypelt meanwhile? She's fretting her whiskers off." Hawkpaw nodded and strode away leaving the two cats. *I'll admit Dazedpaw did well back there, but that doesn't change anything. She's still a burr in my fur.*

She found Daisypelt pacing in anxious circles by the nursery, Raindapple trying to comfort her as she neared them. Daisypelt glanced up with saddened eyes and meowed, "how is he?"

"He's fine, Duckfeather says he'll live."

Relief flooded her vision and Daisypelt sighed, "Thank StarClan."

Raindapple butted in, "your kits want you. Please can you come back inside now?"

"Of course, I'm sorry. Thank you, Hawkpaw." The queen squeezed inside the den with Raindapple, loud mewls sounding from inside. Hawkpaw trotted away to the Halfrock and sprawled out on top of it, enjoying the heat getting soaked up by her dark pelt. She saw Tallwhisker sit down next to his mate, Gentleleaf. The senior warriors bowed their heads as they spoke softly, Hawkpaw catching snippets of their conversation.

"...shouldn't have joined them."

Gentleleaf flicked her tail-tip, "I am still a warrior. I am not going to stop protecting my Clan."

Tallwhisker shook his head, "I know that. You ought to be more careful though, I don't want anything to happen to you or them." He twined his pale tail with her's, licking her forehead.

"Fine, I'll try to take it a bit more easy. But you do know that..."

Hawkpaw couldn't hear anymore. *Wonder what they're so worried about. Oh, well.* She yawned and twisted around, grooming her fur. The sun was sinking down, the last rays fading away. Her Clanmates were beginning to go to their nests. The elders crawled under the beech tree boughs and Sparrowclaw shot a curious look at the medicine cat's den before padding into the warriors' den with Brighteyes and Lilyflower behind him. Morningstar swept his gaze across the camp atop the highledge. He finally turned around and strode into his den, the brambles swishing.

"Are you coming, Hawkpaw?" Applepaw mewed.

"Not right now, I don't feel tired." The young tom shrugged and left her, his dark brown tail-tip disappearing inside the apprentices' den. She got up and made her way to the entrance.

Webfur, who was on guard duty, stopped her, "where are you off to?"

"Just going for a walk," she stated dryly. He knitted his eyebrows together but let her pass. She padded past him and slowed down to a meandering walk. She let her paws guide her and soon found herself at the lake edge. Hawkpaw bent down and lapped at the surface a bit, licking her lips after drinking her fill. She gazed wistfully at the stars shimmering in the bold, night sky. A rustle in some brambles behind her made her whip around to see Russetclaw saunter to the water a few fox-lengths away. He turned his head slowly and stared at her, no expression giving away his feelings. Her paws pricked with unease but she walked up to the border and sat down, challenging him with a fierce glare.

"What are you doing out here so late?" she questioned as he sat down in front of her, careful to remain on his territory.

"I could ask the same to you," he responded coolly.

She growled, "I asked first. Or are you just afraid to answer?"

He shifted his gaze, "no. I was just feeling lonely."

She blinked, "so you came out to the lake in the middle of the

night? I don't think that's going to help you. You should creep back to your Clanmates, dungface." Russetclaw flinched.

"They won't want me."

"Why?"

"They don't trust me."

Hawkpaw tilted her head, "why not?"

He hesitated. "I-I can't tell you. Sorry."

She snorted, "well no wonder no one trusts you. You don't even say what's wrong!"

He sighed and looked back at her. "There are some...complications with my parents. Because of their background my Clan doesn't fully trust me. The only reason I'm with ShadowClan still is probably because of Duskfur. She's the only one who isn't wary of me and treats me like her son, even though she already has one. I am very grateful to her and I don't want to let her down, but I still feel unwanted and am not sure how to prove myself." Against her will, Hawkpaw was starting to feel sympathetic towards the tom.

You can't! she thought angrily. *He is an enemy, that's all. Nothing more, nothing less.* "Well, I am sorry about your situation but am afraid I can't help. Goodbye," she meowed.

"Wait!" he called after her as she turned away. "What if I tell you everything? Will you help me then?"

"Pathetic. If you're a warrior, you would not be begging your enemy for help. I can see why your Clanmates do not trust you, your too willing to betray them."

"How am I betraying them?"

"Because you are talking to me!" she snarled.

Russetclaw observed her peculiarly. "Can I meet you tomorrow night?" he finally said.

Hawkpaw was taken aback. "O-of course not!" she sputtered. "I am not going against the warrior code because of *you*. Goodbye!" She turned tail and fled, unsettled by the ShadowClan warrior. *What was all that about? Is he trying to trick me into trusting him so he can learn about ThunderClan? Unfortunately for him, I'm not so gullible. But still, he had a sad look in his eyes. Ahhh! I have to stop thinking about him and pretend our encounter never happened. Yeah, it never happened.*

Chapter 14

[image]

Hawkpaw was awoken by a grief-stricken yowl. *Huh? What now? It's barely dawn yet.* Hawkpaw went outside to see Raindapple darting back and forth in the camp, nosing any plant and wailing frantically. Daisypelt was watching from the entrance of the nursery with Cloudchaser, who had almost completely healed, standing protectively beside her. The whole Clan was starting to wake up as the queen kept racing around. Sparrowclaw was trying to calm her down but to no prevail. Morningstar finally stepped in and grabbed the dappled she-cat's scruff, holding her back.

She thrashed, trying to escape his grasp while hissing. "Let go of me! I need to hurry, she's in trouble!"

Brighteyes padded forward speaking quietly, "what happened, Raindapple?"

The queen paused and broke down into a sob, "Mosskit! She's gone! I can't find her anywhere!" Sparrowclaw's gaze darkened and Daisypelt looked uncomfortable. *Why is our Clan being plagued with misfortune? Do we deserve all this?* Hawkpaw felt despaired. Rabbitpaw and Snakepaw stood next her.

"I can't believe this," Rabbitpaw whispered.

"Just one thing after another," Snakepaw growled. "StarClan must be punishing us for something." *Is that true? But I'm training with StarClan, they wouldn't hurt my Clan, right? Ugh, I don't understand!* Hawkpaw collapsed and covered her head with her paws. A milky scent hit her nose on the ground. She blinked.

"Do you smell that?"

"Smell what?" Snakepaw mewed. Hawkpaw crouched low and breathed deeply. She was certain now, it was a kit scent. She followed the trail to the secret tunnel, seeing a quivering gray shape

next to it. She breathed a sigh of relief and grabbed it by its scruff. It let out an indignant squeak and wiggled.

"Mosskit!" Rabbitpaw said. The tiny she-kit mewled and Raindapple cried out overjoyed.

"My kit!" She gently took the wriggling bundle in her mouth and purred happily. Sparrowclaw joined her and started furiously grooming his daughter.

"Wow! Hawkpaw that was amazing!" Appelpaw blurted out. Raindapple blinked gratefully at the apprentice and she ducked her head in embarrassment.

"It was nothing," she mumbled.

"Nothing? You just saved my sister." Lightningmask exclaimed and Moonface nodded.

Morningstar padded forward. "You did well to pick up Mosskit's scent. The Clan thanks you, and I'm sure Raindapple is very grateful." He licked her shoulder and she shuddered.

"Thank you, Morningstar."

Flareheart purred, "I'm so proud of you! You aren't far from becoming a warrior." Hawkpaw's chest swelled proudly. She butted her mentor with her head delightedly who continued, "in fact, I think it's about time for you guys to travel to the Moonpool. You would have too eventually anyways so we might as well get it done with." Hawkpaw felt a fresh surge of excitement and she had to stifle a squeak of enthusiasm.

"The Moonpool," Applepaw breathed.

"I can't wait," Snakepaw flexed his claws and Rabbitpaw smiled.

"When do we leave?" she asked.

"Now. It's already dawn so we have a full day to go there." Hawkpaw nodded and felt a hot breath on her flank. She turned around to see Duckfeather.

"You will need traveling herbs. Come to the medicine cat's den," he grunted. He led them inside where Fuzzypaw was busy pulling out leaves. "Did you get everything?"

"I have chamomile, sorrel and daisy leaves," she answered.

"Don't forget burnet," he meowed gruffly.

"Oh yeah, my bad." She fetched some extra leaves and wrapped everything up in several bundles before pushing them forward. "Here you are! Make sure you eat everything," she instructed.

Hawkpaw grabbed a set and started swallowing them up, cringing with every bite.

Applepaw spat out a seed and wrinkled his nose in disgust, "this is terrible!"

"You have to eat everything," Snakepaw muttered.

"You'll be grateful for it later, I promise." Gentleleaf meowed sympathetically as she took a heap of herbs for herself, her round belly brushing the ground as she kneeled. *She must be visiting the prey heap quite a bit.* Tallwhisker stormed in right then.

"Gentleleaf! You can't go!"

She bristled, "why not? My apprentice is going and so am I, you won't be changing my mind."

"But what about...er, the..." He stammered as he glanced around at the alarmed cats in the cave. "Can I speak to you outside?"

She met his gaze evenly, "anything you want to say to me you can say here." He growled in frustration but gave up.

"What about...our kits?" he finally mumbled. Flareheart gasped in astonishment.

"You are having kits?"

Gentleleaf purred, "why do you think my stomach is so swollen?"

"I thought you were just getting fat," mewed Applepaw rewarding him with a scuff to his ear.

"How rude!" she fumed. The cats laughed.

"But, Gentleleaf, you are a senior warrior. Are you sure about this?" Flareheart meowed.

"Yes, the Clan needs warriors and there has been too much tragedy lately. I think some more kits will the lift the spirits of a lot of cats. Besides, I miss raising children. I'd like a change of things for a little."

Tallwhisker gazed at her lovingly and nuzzled her cheek. "I also miss those times. Before I become an elder I'd like another litter to carry on my legacy." Hawkpaw finished the herbs and stood up.

"Well I'm happy for you guys," she said. "Can we leave now?"

Flareheart guffawed. "You are certainly impatient. We might as well get a move on, don't want to waste daylight."

Tallwhisker cut in, "what about Gentleleaf? The journey could be too much for her."

"Don't talk about me like I'm not here," she rumbled. "I'm not that old."

Duckfeather meowed, "she'll be fine. I can tell she has a little while until her kits arrive anyway so I believe she can handle it." He faced Flareheart. "Just make sure she is okay, if she is lagging even the slightest take a small break. Knowing Gentleleaf she will try to say she is okay, but take five minutes. In the worst case scenario I trust you could handle it?" Flareheart nodded.

"Guys, I'm right here!" Gentleleaf snapped. "Honestly, you are all acting like worried fuzz-brains. I will be fine. I'll see you tomorrow, Tallwhisker." She got up and licked her mate's cheek before trotting away. "Pick up your paws!" Applepaw sighed and bounded after his mentor.

"Let's go," Hawkpaw charged away excitedly. *I'm going to the*

Moonpool!

The cats walked through the forest, creaking boughs and crooked limbs whispering in the wind. Gnarled roots were writing into sodden earth beneath their paws, blanketed by a carpet of leaves so dense that not a single glimpse of mud was found.

"How do we get to the Moonpool?" She heard Applepaw whisper to her brother. Hawkpaw slanted her ears in their direction as Rabbitpaw hummed in thought.

"I am pretty sure I heard Moonface say that they had to cross WindClan territory to get there. I'm guessing it's right next to the moor."

"What happens if a WindClan patrol sees us?"

Snakepaw snorted, "don't worry about those rabbit-chasers. If any of them dare to threaten us I'll turn them into mousefodder!"

Hawkpaw suppressed a laugh, "that's a load of badger droppings. You couldn't fight off a mouse!" He glared at her and stomped ahead, traveling next to Webfur who gave a quick glance to his apprentice, his whiskers twitching slightly.

Applepaw purred, "that was a good one, Hawkpaw."

"Ha, thanks." She smiled to herself. *I wonder if I'll get a prophecy from StarClan! Maybe they were waiting for me to go to the Moonpool just to make it official or something like that. Will I see the others in my dream?* She looked at the warriors padding ahead of her. *Did any of them get a prophecy or omen? Did they ever train with StarClan?* The more she thought about it the more excitement bubbled up inside her to the point of her almost exploding. *I can't wait, I hope Thistleclaw does something special for me.*

Suddenly, the group halted and Hawkpaw almost ran into Cloudchaser. "Why are we stopping?" she mewed impatiently as she looked over.

"We're at the WindClan border," Cloudchaser meowed. Her eyes widened at the view. All that could be seen in front of her was

rising moors, rolling on for miles and visible up until a touch of emerald light scathed the horizon. The late greenleaf riot of violet surprised her, speckles of heather dotting the moor. Gorse sprouted here and there, clumping in thick swathes like patches of sunshine against the green heath.

Flareheart took a deep breath, "follow me." She led the group over the scent line, the stale smell of WindClan bothering Hawkpaw. *No dawn patrol yet which means we might encounter one.* They swept through the tall grasses, a sweet tang of heather blossoms curling in the air. The sun was climbing into a pale blue sky where gray clouds massed on the horizon beyond a sea of wind-whisked heather. Hawkpaw narrowed her eyes against the glare.

They had traveled for only several fox-lengths when a few cats leaped out. In the lead, a stocky, light brown tom with slender shoulders let his gaze inspect her patrol.

He finally meowed, "are you traveling to the Moonpool?" Flareheart bowed, signaling for the rest of them to follow her lead. Hawkpaw scowled but listened, not wanting to stir up trouble.

"We are, Weaselflight," she spoke stiffly.

"It's a rather large group for the Moonpool, don't you think?"

"ThunderClan is brimming with youth," she responded coolly. Weaselflight's gaze hardened but he didn't push it.

"My patrol will escort you."

"Is WindClan worried about an invasion?"

"As if. I just want to make sure you make it there safely." Hawkpaw rolled her eyes, *yeah right. What could possibly happen to us on the moor? Get cuddled by a sheep?*

"Thank you for your hospitality, please lead on then." Weaselflight spun around and an orange calico sniffed disdainfully. *Spottedfire!* Hawkpaw felt dread grip her upon seeing the warrior who was also training with StarClan. *Will she give away my secret? How would my clanmates react?* She tried to hide behind Gentleleaf but it was too

late, the she-cat had spotted her. Spottedfire didn't do anything apart from stare. She gave a very slight nod that went unnoticed from everyone else as if she understood. *Thank StarClan,* Hawkpaw eased up and collected herself, the fur along her spine lying flat once more.

Hawkpaw and her clanmates were escorted by the WindClan patrol to their border. Weaselflight stepped back to allow them passage to the other side. Cherrywind, a dark brown she-cat, scowled as they passed her. Hawkpaw was tempted to shoot her a sly look but voted against it and walked away quietly, her head held high. They reached a stone hollow where, situated at the bottom, was a small, clear pool.

"Is that it?" Applepaw whispered. Gentleleaf nodded her head. The cats slowly descended and Hawkpaw took in every detail. On one side, there was a steep cliff with water flowing out from a cleft, feeding the pool. There was also a narrow path dimpled with ancient pawprints that lead down to a flat stone beach next to the pool. The bright moon reflected on its mirror-like surface.

Flareheart spoke up, disturbing the awestruck silence. "Touch your nose to the water and close your eyes. StarClan will visit you." Hawkpaw padded forward and put her nose to the still water, soft ripples dancing away. The cold liquid shocked her and she shivered before leaning back and lying down, tucking her paws neatly underneath her body. She closed her eyes and fell asleep.

Darkness pressed in from all sides, clinging to her body like a damp blanket. She still found the lack of light disturbing. The moon was gone, inky blackness engulfing her as she strained her eyes to see anyone. A white face with gray patches mottling it appeared followed by a gray-and-white body.

"Thistleclaw! Am I going to get a prophecy?"

The tom purred with amusement, "unfortunately not. Come with me, I'd like to show you around."

"Oh." Disappoint settled in her stomach like a heavy stone. She trotted after her mentor, her pads scraping the rough ground as she

dragged her feet. *I've already seen StarClan, I want something more special.* Hawkpaw frowned as no scent of prey was to be found, only the smell of decay. "Is this *really* StarClan's hunting ground?"

"Of course. This is where the strongest and greatest cats come after they die." Thistleclaw padded up the slope, his eyes glinting. "You will come here one day too."

"After I'm ThunderClan's leader?"

"Not just the leader of ThunderClan, the greatest leader all the Clans have ever known." He turned to face her. "At least if you follow me."

A shadow moved between the trees at the corner of Hawkpaw's vision. She whipped her head around and saw a pelt moving through the half-light. White fur gleamed, a ginger tail with a hypnotic black swirl on the tip lashed.

Thistleclaw brushed past the she-cat. "Leave us, Shatteredgaze. I don't have time for you." *Shatteredgaze?* Hawkpaw stared at the she-cat who was snarling angrily.

"You think you're actually a special cat?" she spat at her. Thistleclaw froze and scowled. "Thistleclaw is lying to you, he's a liar! You're such a foolish cat, thinking you're any better than the rest of us. You don't deserve to be here, what did you ever sacrifice?" Confusion racked Hawkpaw's brain. *What is she talking about?*

Thistleclaw's voice was barely audible. "Don't speak anymore."

"Guess what, you don't have a great destiny. He is only using you, like the rest of us trapped here!" *Trapped? How can she be trapped in StarClan?* "Do you even know where this is? Your-" Thistleclaw cut her off by biting into her tail, making her howl in pain. Shatteredgaze tore away while yowling behind her, "It's all a lie!"

Hawkpaw shook with fear and bewilderment. *What was she talking about?* "Thistleclaw?"

He was still growling to himself and muttered, "You must go back to

your Clanmates now. They'll be waking from their dreams."

"Is that it? What about Shatteredgaze?"

"Ignore her, she's a crazy old fleabag."

"Wait!" She fought to stay, digging her claws into the slimy earth as the forest began to fade around her. "No! I'm not ready!" She woke, bristling with frustration. Light was starting to peek over the steep cliff. The moon had passed. A salmon and purple sky hung above now. *What was all that about? What did Shatteredgaze mean by lies? Wasn't I supposed to meet my ancestors and learn wise stuff, and how to achieve my destiny?* Hawkpaw stood up, surprised to find that her muscles felt stiff. Snakepaw and Rabbitpaw were getting to their paws beside her. Gentleleaf was stretching while Flareheart was pacing back and forth as if she couldn't wait to leave. Webfur and Cloudchaser were already grooming themselves.

"Applepaw?" Hawkpaw mewed as she nudged the apprentice gently. He snapped awake, his yellow eyes clouded with drowsiness. Hawkpaw wondered what vision he'd had. Had he met his ThunderClan ancestors? Or perhaps he was as disappointed as her.

After everyone was ready, the patrol headed home in silence. At the camp, Hawpaw eagerly trotted to the fresh-kill pile, her stomach growling hungrily. She sniffed at a small water mole before picking it up and carrying it a few mouselengths away to eat.

"How was your trip to the Moonpool?"

Hawkpaw looked up from her meal as Lightningmask stopped beside her.

"It was great," she lied. *If only he knew.* She took another bite of her water mole thoughtfully. *Who is Shatteredgaze? I wish I understood what she meant, maybe she is just crazy after all.* She sighed and looked across the camp at Fuzzypaw who was chatting with Owlpelt. She snarled to herself. *That stupid kit! Did she get a prophecy? She certainly acted sure of herself when she came back from the Moonpool. I am not going to be beaten by a know-it-all mouse-brain!*

Chapter 15

[image]

Nearly two moons had passed and the musk of leaf-fall filled the air. The hot greenleaf kiss was fading, welcoming the cold days yet to come. Hawkpaw was busy in the nursery plucking old moss from the beds. Gentleleaf was finally persuaded by Tallwhisker to move in after he begged her constantly, and she grew so tired she just caved in. Applepaw was sad to see his mentor move to the nursery, and was now stuck with Ravenpelt. She felt bad, Ravenpelt was about as moody as Robinpelt, the crankiest elder known. She sighed as she pushed aside another stack of worn lichen. She wished she could have help, but Applepaw was out training and Rabbitpaw and Snakepaw were hunting somewhere.

Snakepaw suddenly barged in, his silver tabby pelt bristling with excitement. "Guess what?"

Hawkpaw flashed a look of thunder towards him as the sudden gust of air scattered her pile. "Look what you did! I just spent all morning collecting that," she shrieked.

"Look, you can claw me later, we are having our warrior assessments now!" Hawkpaw completely forgot about her job and lurched outside.

"Come on, slowpoke!" She yelled at her brother who was slipping out after her. Softkit and Cherrykit tumbled over and wound around their paws.

"Can we come?" Softkit fluttered her lashes pleadingly. Hawkpaw's whiskers twitched.

"Sorry, but you aren't allowed to go out yet."

"Please? We want to watch your evaluation," Cherrykit mewed.

"How do you know we are having our assessment?" Snakepaw

rebuked with a scoff.

Softkit blinked, "we just do."

"It wouldn't have anything to do with eavesdropping, now would it?" he meowed.

Cherrykit gasped, "never! We wouldn't do that." Hawkpaw had to choke back a purr.

"I'm sure. Another time," Hawkpaw vowed.

"There won't be another time," Softkit muttered.

"Sorry. Wish us luck!" Hawkpaw charged off with her littermate at her heels, the two kits staring after them.

"Bring us fresh-kill!" Softkit squeaked. Hawkpaw smiled and ran outside. They raced to the training area where they found Rabbitpaw, Applepaw, Ravenpelt, Cloudchaser, Webfur, Flareheart and Morningstar waiting.

"What's Applepaw doing here?" Snakepaw asked as they trotted over.

"He'll be helping with your test," Ravenpelt growled. The brown apprentice lifted his head.

"Morningstar?" Hawkpaw cocked her head. *Why was the leader here?*

"I'll be watching you three during your assessment, I would like to see the potential of my future warriors," he meowed. Hawkpaw gulped, her nerves tingling.

"Well then, let's get started," Flareheart whisked her tail. "How about we start with hunting. I want each of you to catch two pieces of prey. One of them must be a bird. Hawkpaw, you will hunting by the abandoned Twoleg nest, and Rabbitpaw can hunt by the Sky Oak. Snakepaw, you can go anywhere you like, try to pick a rich spot."

Hawkpaw bounced on her toes a little, *I love hunting!* "Very well,"

she mewed.

Her mentor gave a calm smile, "We will be watching you guys to see your progress. But don't worry about us, focus on hunting."

"Of course," Rabbitpaw waved his tail.

"You may start whenever you feel ready," Cloudchaser grinned. Hawkpaw didn't hesitate to pad away in the direction of the house. She saw the old nest standing mute. The only residents now were the spiders. Many generations had laced the walls with cobwebs of intricate beauty, though now even they lay in dusty rags. She sniffed around it, eager to find prey. *Calm down,* she reminded herself. *You need to take your time and focus.*

She silently slipped inside, shuddering from the encasing walls. She opened her mouth to catch any scents and swiveled her ears as she heard the distinct scampering of mouse. Getting into a stalking crouch she slowly crept to it, readying her legs for the pounce. *I got this! It's just like normal, except someone is constantly watching me and judging.* Suppressing a shiver of fear she leapt, swiftly killing the mouse. *Yes! Only one more to go!* Proudly, she buried her newly caught prey next to the abandoned nest and continued her search. Walking slowly, she detected the faint smell of sparrow. She spotted the small and plump brown-gray songbird picking at a worm among bracken.

She quietly approached it until she was close enough. The sparrow managed to pull the worm free then. Taking a deep breath she burst from the brush and startled the bird. The sparrow squawked in surprise and tried to fly away but she quickly hooked it with her claws, holding it down. Hurriedly, she nipped its neck and gave a breath of relief. *I completed my first task. I wonder how the others are doing?*

She backtracked and uncovered her mouse, bringing the two creatures back to the training arena. Applepaw was playing with some moss as his new mentor was busy grooming his pelt. They looked up as she returned, amazement lighting Applepaw's eyes.

"Wow! That was fast, you are the first back." Hawkpaw purred and

dropped the prey. Flareheart came in behind her.

"That was great, even Morningstar was impressed."

"You were both watching?"

"Yup." Flareheart chuckled and sniffed Hawkpaw's catches. "The Clan will be happy."

Rabbitpaw trotted out of some trees all of a sudden, a thrush and vole in his mouth. Cloudchaser appeared next, his muzzle raised to the sky.

"I think a storm is brewing," he murmured. Hawkpaw eyed the sky nervously. The clouds that had been wispy and white that morning were now darker and more dense. She shifted her paws, this was not the day to be caught in a downpour.

Ravenpelt glanced up from his grooming, "let's speed this up." Flareheart nodded.

After several heartbeats, Snakepaw joined them. He only had a robin hanging in his jaws and put it next to the other fresh-kill, his mentor shaking his head slowly as he sat down.

"It's okay, Snakepaw. That rabbit was scrawny anyways," Webfur meowed.

"Still would have fed the Clan," Snakepaw hissed, anger blazing in his yellow eyes.

"Aww, could you not handle the wittle wabbit?" Hawkpaw teased.

"Shut up, I'm better at fighting," he snarled.

Morningstar strode forward, "let us move on to battle techniques. We will be assessing your battle skills right here. Who would like to start?"

Hawkpaw eagerly hopped up and down, "Me please!"

Morningstar gave a nod and flicked his tail at Snakepaw, "you will

be her opponent. You two may use anything you've been taught, just make sure your claws are sheathed."

Hawkpaw saw Ravenpelt whisper in Applepaw's ear, "watch them and learn." She flexed her muscles and readied herself in the middle of the clearing. The others sat around the edge.

Snakepaw glared, "get ready."

"Oh believe me, I've been aching for this. I'll make sure to defeat you again in this rematch."

"Hmpf, don't act so arrogant. I've been training hard." *If only you knew brother,* she thought smugly.

"Begin!" Morningstar's yowl resounded in her ears and she launched herself. Snakepaw rolled to the right and slammed against her side.

She landed with a thud as Snakepaw scoffed, "you fight like a kittypet! And you think you can become a warrior?" He was about to pin her down when she shot up and swiped both forepaws, batting him back until he jumped away. Hawkpaw felt a rush of satisfaction as she leaped, but it turned to confusion as Snakepaw unexpectedly sprang into the air and let her crash into the ground where he had stood just a heartbeat before. He secured himself on her back, nipping her ear. She hissed in frustration and threw him off, staggering onto her paws. *I will win!*

This time, as Snakepaw leaped at Hawkpaw, he stretched out his forepaws. She reared up on her hind legs and used her forepaws to twist him away. Snakepaw scrambled with his hind paws in the moss, but it was too late and he flopped heavily unto his side. She let out a triumphant yowl as she held him down.

He spat in annoyance, "mouse-dung!"

Webfur sighed, "good job, Hawkpaw, again. Please exit, I would like Rabbitpaw and Applepaw next."

"Me?" Applepaw squeaked.

"Let's do this," Rabbitpaw bellowed as he hopped into the clearing.

Applepaw gulped nervously and followed the older apprentice.

The fight didn't take long. Applepaw was overcome by her brother quickly, allowing them to move on to the final task. They halted in front of the Sky Oak, where each of the apprentices had to climb it. Hawkpaw and her littermates passed with ease, so with the extra time they had, they put Applepaw to the test. Hawkpaw wanted to watch his try to climb the tree, but Flareheart beckoned her with her tail. They padded away promptly and slowed down to a calm pace.

"Hawkpaw, what do you know about battle? Well a more specific question is, what do you know about surprise attacks?"

Hawkpaw tilted her head in thought, "Well, in surprise attacks you must be very vigilant and quiet, and be aware of your surroundings. You must also keep downwind of the trespassers so that your scent doesn't give you away." *I think that's correct at least.*

Flareheart kept walking, listening to her explanation. "Yes, that is quite right. But you missed one thing." The she-cat stopped, turned around, and leaped at her while knocking her over to the side, but not too hard that is hurt. "Never let your guard down," Flareheart shook out her fur and sat down.

Hawkpaw quickly regained her footing and growled, narrowing her dark green eyes. "That's not fair," she complained.

Flareheart let out a mrrow of laughter. "Trust me, that isn't the worst thing that you'll have to face." She gave a small goofy smile. "In battle with cats or even other animals, you have to be focused. You can't read their minds, so they could attack at any moment. Now, if someone does attack you, what is the first thing you should do?"*She is obviously testing my knowledge,* Hawkpaw thought.

Hawkpaw screwed up her face in concentration. "Well of course I would assess my attacker as I dodge their blows for any weaknesses," she mewed.

Flareheart nodded in agreement. "You were wonderful today."

She grinned, "I know."

"Hawkpaw, through thick and thin, you've come very far on your apprenticeship journey, and I am so proud that I was able to share my knowledge with you." The ginger she-cat gave a soft smile, trying to hide her sadness. "And I hope you have an amazing experience as a warrior." Hawkpaw dipped his head in respect, her eyes started to slightly water.

"Thank you for everything. You were a great mentor." She nuzzled her sweetly, purring so hard she couldn't speak anymore. *I'm finally going to become a warrior!*

After collecting their fresh-kill, they returned to the camp, excitement thrumming through Hawkpaw's spiked fur. The warriors went inside the leader's den, Morningstar's brown tipped tail disappearing in the cave. She sat anxiously next to her brother's, waiting beneath the highledge. *I hope we passed,* she prayed. Lightningmask and Moonface joined them.

"How did it go?" asked Moonface.

"Good, I think," Rabbitpaw mewed.

"Snakepaw was terrible," Hawkpaw sneered.

Her brother lashed his tail, "I was not! Webfur said I was excellent."

"He only said that because he felt bad for his poor apprentice."

Moonface chortled and meowed, "come on you two. Don't argue now."

"Yeah, they might still be watching you," Lightningmask smirked.

"That's funny," Hawkpaw poked his rib cage.

"Shush! Here they come," Rabbitpaw fidgeted. Their mentors padded down and seated themselves as Morningstar stepped out. His calico pelt was lifted in the breeze as he stood on the highledge. *This is it!*

Chapter 16

[image]

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather here beneath the highledge for a Clan meeting." Hawkpaw felt excitement buzz in her stomach as her Clanmates assembled around her. Morningstar waited patiently and let his gaze scan the cats below him. His stare finally fixated on her and her brothers, his light blue eyes sparkling.

"Today we name three new warriors Snakepaw, Rabbitpaw and Hawkpaw, please step forward." She inhaled sharply and strode up, careful to take her time. She sat beside him, her paws vibrating. Morningstar lifted his muzzle to the sky before continuing.

"I, Morningstar, leader of ThunderClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these three apprentices. They all have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as a warrior in their turn." He turned his head back to them. "Do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do," she mewed.

"I do!" Snakepaw was quivering with anticipation.

"I do," squeaked Rabbitpaw. Hawkpaw's whiskers twitched.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Hawkpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Hawkfire. StarClan honors your skill in battle and loyalty, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan." Morningstar proceeded to

rest his muzzle on her head, his whiskers brushing against her as she stretched her neck to lick his broad shoulder.

Hawkfire slid over as Morningstar moved on, "Rabbitpaw." Her brother took a deep breath and slowly stepped up. He stood in front of Morningstar, his chest heaving heavily as if he were out of breath. Their leader meowed, "From this moment on you will be known as Rabbitclaw. StarClan honors your dedication and kindness." He laid his snout upon Rabbitclaw's head who in return licked his shoulder. Snakepaw shuffled forward next. *Ha! Your last to become warrior,* Hawkfire thought smugly. She caught his eye and he scowled as if he knew what she was thinking.

"Snakepaw, you have earned your warrior name. You shall be known as Snakefang. StarClan honors your strength and courage." Morningstar threw back his head and yowled, "Hawkfire! Rabbitclaw! Snakefang!" The Clan joined in and soon enough, the soaring walls encircling the camp echoed with their yowls. She couldn't swallow back her pride and gave a small smile, her head slightly tilted up. *I'm finally a warrior! Next, I'll become leader.*

Hawkfire saw Lightningmask tip back his head to raise his voice which carried above the others. *How obnoxious,* she smiled. As the cheering died down, she leaped down and was instantly swarmed by her Clanmates. Lightningmask shouldered his way through to be the first.

"Congratulations! I knew it wouldn't be long before you became a warrior." His eyes shone with pride and joy as if he were the one just made a warrior.

"Thanks," she couldn't stifle the purr rising in her throat anymore.

Flareheart smiled warmly, "I'm so proud of you. I'm sure your parents are watching in Silverpelt right now and overjoyed at your accomplishment." A sharp jab of sorrow hit her as she thought sourly, *I wish they were here with me. If only I had been stronger before.* Nonetheless, she dipped her head respectfully to her former mentor.

Applepaw pushed forward next, his mew edged with jealousy, "I'm

so happy for you, congrats! Too bad I won't listen to you fidget in your sleep anymore."

"I don't fidget," she meowed, her pelt burning with embarrassment. Realizing the apprentice would be by himself, she felt sympathetic towards him. "Don't worry though, Softkit and Cherrykit will be made apprentices soon enough to join you." He grinned and squeezed through the crowd to get to her brothers.

She saw Fuzzypaw make her way over and gloated happily, "Ha! I beat you, Dazedpaw."

She was shocked when all the apprentice did was bow her head and mew sadly, "Congratulations, Hawkfire." *What's up with her now? She should be happy, not sad.* She shrugged the thought away as the kits scampered over.

"I can't believe you're a warrior," Cherrykit breathed.

"Whatever, I'm still going to become the greatest warrior of all," Softkit squeaked and fluffed out her pelt. Hawkfire purred and felt downy fur brush her legs as Mosskit arrived from under her.

Mosskit pouted, "I want to be a warrior." She suddenly brightened up then and smirked. "One day, I'll be as strong as you, so don't think for a moment you don't have competition."

"No, of course not," Hawkfire rumbled. "I'll have to look out for you."

"And me!" Softkit broke in.

"Uh uh, I am stronger so you don't count." Mosskit retorted and swiped a paw. Softkit squealed and the two started to roll around in the dirt.

"Break it up you two! Honestly," Raindapple muttered before smiling at Hawkfire. "May StarClan light your path. You have certainly come far." Hawkfire nuzzled her mother's old friend.

"Thank you."

Morningstar padded over then and mewed with a quick glance at the tousling kits, "Join me, Hawkfire." She waved her tail to Raindapple and trotted away with her leader. *I wonder what he wants to talk about? Maybe he's going to make me deputy now! Wait, but what about Flareheart?*

The old calico tom stopped beside a mossy rock. Soft evening light filtered through the rustling leaves, bees humming sleepily among the wildflowers. A crow called from the branches above their heads.

"What is it?"

"I just wanted to speak with you alone." He paused and closed his eyes. "Your journey to become a warrior has been hard, but you have dealt with it well. I am sorry about the loss of Fallengaze and Sorrelbreeze, they shall be missed still."

Hawkfire nodded as he continued, "What do you want?" He asked so softly she barely heard him. *What do I want? To become leader and a strong warrior I suppose.*

"I want to become a great warrior," she meowed simply.

"Is that all you want? To become a great warrior?"

"I guess."

"What else is there?" Hawkfire wondered where all these questions were leading. Did Morningstar distrust her? She narrowed her eyes and swallowed back her anger. She'd trained harder than any other apprentice!

"I just want to look after my Clan and keep everyone safe. After all, that's the most important thing in the world." *And becoming leader.*

Morningstar opened his eyes and stared hard at Hawkfire for a moment. She shifted her paws.

He finally looked away, "really?" His mew trailed away as she burst out.

"I can prove myself to you still! Give me any task, any quest, fight

any battle and I'll do it to show I can be great!"

He stared at her fixedly, "I do not doubt you for a heartbeat. You have proven your loyalty plenty of times. But being a warrior isn't just about courage and skill and being ready for combat."

What is it about then? Hawkfire watched her leader pad away, leaving her dumbfounded.

Night fell and Hawkfire and her littermates sat by the entrance, ready for their silent vigil.

"Good luck," Lightningmask gave a wry smile. She purred and watched the rest of the Clan creep into their nests. Morningstar was the only one left.

"You know what to do. I'll see you three tomorrow then, as full fledged warriors." His eyes glowed and he strode back to his den, leaving them alone. Hawkfire glanced at her brothers. Snakefang was hunched over, weariness plain to see in his figure while Rabbitclaw was sitting erect. She dug her claws in the dirt, too excited to be tired. *I wonder if any cat will try to attack? Well, I'll be ready!*

The night dragged on sluggishly, her bones aching from not moving. Snakefang was beginning to nod off, even Rabbitclaw was starting to squirm restlessly. As light started to leak down on the trio, Morningstar came out. Snakefang breathed a sigh of relief as he dismissed them.

"I presume you already built beds for yourselves," he meowed. They nodded and staggered to the warriors' den. *I can finally sleep here.* Her paws pricked as she entered, the heat of warm bodies enveloping around her. She found her nest right by the front, squished between Rabbitclaw and Lightningmask. She curled up and tucked her nose under her thick tail, happiness pouring out of her. *I am sleeping in the warriors' den!*

"Excellent job! You finally became a warrior, little one." Thistleclaw brushed against her pelt, a purr resounding in his throat.

"I'm not little anymore," she snarled.

Thistleclaw stiffened and growled, "you are still little to me. You have a long way to come in your training yet."

"What more can I possibly learn?" she questioned.

"Do not forget you are training with *StarClan* and *I* am the one who is helping you become leader." She lowered but decided to not provoke him. "Come now." They made their way to the clearing where the others were. Nettleclaw sniffed as they joined them, the trees visible beyond his pelt.

"Heard you actually became a warrior. Took you long enough."

"Silence," she ordered, not bothering with him. He narrowed his eyes but Thistleclaw stood between them.

"Hawkfire, we have a new cat with us today. Please welcome, Sootpaw." A dark gray tom ducked forward, his yellow eyes glinting. *He doesn't seem much older than six moons and reeks of ShadowClan. Wait, isn't he Duskfur's kit? I didn't know he was made an apprentice. Also, why does this cat remind me of something I can't quite put my finger on.*

The young tom met her gaze smoothly, "I am ready and willing to train under you, Hawkfire." She nodded approvingly.

"You come from ShadowClan, correct?"

"Yes. My mother is Duskfur and my..." he broke off with a snarl. "Er, adopted brother is...Russetclaw." *Russetclaw!* She had completely forgotten about the clouded tabby tom. *Does Sootpaw have something against Russetclaw?*

"Father?"

"Dead." She looked askance at him. *I hope I can trust him.*

"Well, let us move on to training now." Thistleclaw interrupted and he flicked his tail at Eeltail. "You can fight him," he instructed her. She flexed her muscles and cracked her neck.

Eeltail curled his lip, "I'm ready when you are."

"I've been ready," she swiped at his face, her claws snagging on his nose and pierced the skin. He yelped and tried to swat at her but she easily ducked and sank her teeth into his tail. Eeltail ripped his tail free and whipped around, slapping her down with his paws. Hawkfire's head reeled as she smacked the ground and felt claws rake her. She hissed in pain and frustration as a talon ripped her flesh on her left shoulder, blood trickling through her fur. Hawkfire pummeled him off and grabbed his flanks before he got away, dragging him down. She tasted blood swell up in her mouth as she bit into his neck. Eeltail screeched and writhed, trying to escape but she only clamped down harder until he was forced to give up.

"Very good," Mudfang praised but she didn't let go. Her vision blurred and she crunched into his flesh more, her flattened ears blocking out his howls. *Blood, blood, blood. Kill, kill, kill.* The odd voice sung inside her head and she struggled to push it away. *No! Stop!*

Teeth grabbed her scruff and hauled her away, hefty paws holding her down. She snapped her jaws wildly at her new foe, spit flying. The voice eventually faded away and her senses returned, letting her see what was happening. She immediately discerned Tideclaw holding her down, then froze at the sight of Sharkpaw kneeling beside Eeltail. The bracken colored tom was lying still, blood pooling from his neck.

"I-is he dead?" she managed to croak. Sharkpaw shook his head slowly.

"Almost, I don't know if he'll live though." Sootpaw was shaking like a brittle leaf in the wind, ready to be swept away from the tiniest breath. *It happened again, what* is *wrong with me? Why am I doing this?* Hawkfire screwed her eyes shut, finding herself in her nest. The only other cats in the den where her brothers now. *I must have missed patrols,* she figured. A long cut was on her shoulder blade and she cleaned it, exhausted. She cringed at the tart flavor of her own blood. She stood up and slipped outside, her fur fluffing out against the cold. *I hate leaf-bare.* Hawkfire stalked over to the fresh-kill pile and plucked a mouse from it, ignoring the scrawny pigeon.

She sat down and took a bite of the critter, it's juicy tang warming her instantly.

Brighteyes walked over and meowed, "would you like to join Lavenderstripe, Webfur and I on a hunting party? We need to stock up on prey."

"Sure, let me finish this real quick." She gulped down the rest of the mouse in four bites and sat up, licking her chops. She joined her Clanmates and pushed away all thoughts about Eeltail. *I'm sure he's fine. Besides, now's isn't the time to worry about him, I am going on my first patrol as a warrior!* Hawkfire bounced on her toes as they left, purring happily.

"You're in a pleasant mood," Webfur commented.

"Why wouldn't I be, I'm a warrior now," she reminded him.

"True, true." He smiled and tasted the air. "Squirrel!" Just as the words tumbled out of his mouth, a red streak pelted past them and they gave chase. Hawkfire was gaining on the prey when it abruptly darted up a tree, balancing on the top branches.

"Fox-dung," she exclaimed.

"Oh, well. There's still plenty of prey in the forest. Come on, let's not lag behind the others." They caught back up and Lavenderstripe inspected them.

"Did you catch it?" Webfur shook his head and they moved on. After awhile, they returned to camp with two birds and a vole between the four of them. Hawkfire washed herself by the highledge, wishing she had something to do to keep her busy. She kept picturing Eeltail shrieking in her mind. She shuddered and saw Fuzzypaw trot out of the medicine cat's den just then. The apprentice flashed her a worried glance before heading out of camp, making Hawkfire frown. *She has been acting strange around me lately. Something's obviously bothering her, but what?*

Chapter 17

[image]

The lake reflected the silver orb. Hawkfire pawed at the surface and watched the ripples disturb it.

"Hawkpaw?" She craned her neck and squinting, detecting Russetclaw.

"Hawkfire," she corrected and turned back to the lake.

She heard him walk over deliberately and she whipped around with a snarl. "You're on my territory."

He blinked, "are you going to attack."

She opened her mouth but hesitated. *What are you waiting for, surprise him, now's your chance!* Instead she faced the water once more. "No." *What are you thinking, mouse-brain!*

"Okay." He sat next to her and looked up at the night sky. "It's a pleasant night."

"I guess."

"How are you doing?"

"Fine."

There was a moment of silence between them. "You're not going to ask how I am?"

"Nope."

"Why?"

"Because."

He sighed in exasperation, "why are you so hostile towards me?"

"Why shouldn't I be? You're my enemy," she grunted.

"Just because I am from another Clan?"

"Basically."

"I think that's stupid," he meowed.

"So are you since you are actually sitting on *my* land like it's nothing."

"It isn't you land."

Hawkfire bristled, "how dare you! Of course it is!"

He gazed at her queerly, his striking yellow eyes fixated on her own. "Just because you set down markers doesn't mean it belongs to you. Anyone can do that."

She shook her head, "why do I even bother to talk with you."

Russetclaw chuckled, "sorry. I'll go now, but thanks for *bothering* with me." He licked her forehead and strode away, leaving her staring after him in bewilderment. *Did he...no...he didn't right? Please tell me he did not just lick me.* She shuddered. *What am I thinking?*

Hawkfire got up and yawned, trekking back home. She nestled in her nest and was instantly greeted by Thistleclaw. Before she had a chance to even open her mouth, he attacked. She cried out as he bit into the back of her neck, shaking her scruff wildly. Hawkfire's head rattled and she saw stars when he slapped her head with a hefty paw. She struggled free and barely had time to defend herself against his vicious blows flying at her, anger flaring in his eyes.

"What's the matter with you?" she yowled as he snarled and reared up. Hawkfire spun around and kicked out her back legs, catching his belly and sending him spinning away. As he lay on the ground panting she sat down to groom her paw.

"Why did you do that?" she growled.

"Traitor," he gasped.

"Huh?"

Thistleclaw shakily stood up. "Traitor! How could you go against your Clan like that?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Russetclaw!" he snapped. "You were hanging around that fox-heart like a lovesick dove."

"I was not!" she retorted, her ears burning with shame.

"Oh please. It was so easy to see. You were fawning over him," he snarled and shook out his pelt.

"That's not it, I was just speaking with him. The warrior code permits that I may have friends from other Clans, though I could hardly say we're that close."

Thistleclaw spat, "Then why is it I see you falling in love with him in the future? Hawkfire, if you don't stop meeting this cat, you will eventually betray your Clan." He circled her, his pelt grazing her. "You don't want that, do you?" he murmured.

Hawkfire shook her head, "no."

"What do you want."

"To become leader."

"Then stop, stop now. Or else I see you will go awry and choose the wrong path." Hawkfire faltered. Did she really have to stop meeting Russetclaw? Not like she cared or anything, but was it that wrong? She was certain she could never love a cat like that anyways, and friends were okay.

She sighed and gave up. "Okay, you win, Thistleclaw."

He purred in relief, "good. I'm proud that you did the right thing here. You won't regret your decision, I promise. After all, everything I do is in your best interests."

The full moon shone brightly. Crickets sung a harmonious chorus to mourn greenleaf's departure. Hawkfire waited for Snakefang to cross the fallen tree to get to the island. Once he made it across the bridge she hopped up, stabbing the bark with her outstretched claws to keep from falling into the water below. She recalled the first time she was going to a Gathering and had plunged in, Lightningmask rescuing her. She scowled, hating how she was so weak then. She made it across smoothly and the rest caught up, Morningstar the last.

"I hear cats," Cloudchaser reported.

Tallwhisker tasted the air, "It's WindClan and RiverClan."

"Come on then, let's not be last," Flareheart urged. Morningstar led them to the edge of the tree line where they paused. He held his tail still, then kinked it over his back and they charged forward. Hawkfire plunged into the clearing and saw dozens of cats milling about. She headed over to Pebblepaw who was speaking with two WindClan warriors.

"Hello, Pebblepaw," she greeted him.

He smiled heartily, "I'm not Pebblepaw anymore, the name is Pebbledust now."

"Oh! That's great! I also am not a 'paw anymore," she purred. "I'm known as Hawkfire."

"Cool, glad to hear it." The two WindClan warriors sniffed Hawkfire curiously and she reeled back from their heather scent clogging her nose.

"Nice to meet you, Hawkfire. I am Barkfur," a dark brown tom meowed, his white patches glowing. "This is my Clanmate, Goldenfeather." The other tom gave a polite nod. He had a coat of pale orange with speckles on his back she noticed.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance as well," she mewed humbly. *They look like senior warriors from all their scars.* She faced Pebbledust again, "where is Runningpaw?" She squinted and tried to

peer above the sea of heads.

"You mean Runningmouth? He is with his sister over there," he flicked his tail at a cluster of WindClan cats mingling with RiverClan.

"Ah, so they also earned their warrior names."

"Yup. Runningmouth and Ashbreeze. I can join you guys later." Hawkfire grinned and left, finding the WindClan siblings among the group.

"Hey, Runningmouth! Ashbreeze!" she meowed. The two turned around and Runningmouth's face instantly lit up.

"Hawkpaw! How've you been?" he asked pleasantly. Ashbreeze poked her muzzle close.

"Is Lightningmask here tonight?" she meowed before Hawkfire could respond.

"Uh, no. He is at camp." The gray she-cat gave a long sigh and turned back around. Hawkfire realized Runningmouth was still expecting an answer and she giggled.

"Anyways, I'm good. Thanks for asking, but I'm Hawkfire now."

"Oh yea! Congratulations! Did you have an easy assessment? Or perhaps you did something super heroic. What was it like becoming a warrior? Frightening? Exciting? Did you also sit a silent vigil?" As usual, questions flooded out of the small black-and-white tom. *He truly does have the fastest mouth. His name suits him very well.*

The sudden appearance of ShadowClan stopped her. They streaked down and instantly broke apart to blend with the crowd. She saw Maplepelt trot over with Sootpaw. The she-cat sniffed disdainfully at her but didn't make a rude remark like normal.

"Hello." Maplepelt sat next to them and stared expectantly at the great oak tree, Sootpaw following her example.

"Is your family here?" she mewed to Sootpaw who narrowed his

eyes. He gave a slight nod and she saw Duskfur introducing Russetclaw to her Clanmates.

Willowstar yowled atop of the tree, "let the Gathering begin!" The cats settled down and quieted as the leaders made their way up. The RiverClan leader started.

"RiverClan is doing well. The river still holds plenty of fish and we have a new warrior, Pebbledust!" Hawkfire raised her voice to the darkened sky and chanted his name. Once everyone stopped, Willowstar let Yellowstar take her place.

"WindClan is also well. Rabbits are plentiful and we too have new warriors. Ashbreeze and Runningmouth!" The two warriors beside her puffed out their chests as the Clans called out. Yellowstar waited and continued, "we also have two additional apprentices tonight, Breezepaw and Hollowpaw." Hawkfire spotted a white she-cat duck her head as a young tabby beside her shuffled his paws.

Inkstar padded forward next. "ShadowClan welcomes a new litter from Sandfur and Longtooth. Ivykit and Redkit." Murmurs of approval erupted from the cats seated below.

Morningstar passed Inkstar and Hawkfire saw that hostility between the two was minimal. Her leader yowled, "ThunderClan has thrived from greenleaf and we welcome three new warriors. Rabbitclaw, Snakefang and Hawkfire." She raised her chin and beamed, swelling with pride. She could see her brothers doing the same out of the corner of her eye. Hawkfire gazed longingly at Silverpelt as the cats around her cheered. *Are you watching Fallengaze? Sorrelbreeze? I wish you were here for this moment, I miss you. I avenged your deaths so there is nothing to worry about, I promise I'll make you proud and become the greatest warrior the Clans have ever seen.*

Chapter 18

[image]

Bitter cold nipped at her as Hawkfire padded outside. She fluffed out her pelt to try to keep out the cold, but it didn't do much. She grumbled miserably, "I hate this weather." She began grooming herself as she watched the apprentices out of the corner of her eye. Softpaw and Cherrypaw, who were just made apprentices a half-moon ago, were packing the elders' den with extra honeysuckle to keep out the freezing air. Robinpelt was glaring from inside, obviously complaining about them. She strained her ears to hear what he was saying.

"Apprentices these days, so slow and careless. Pollen from those stupid flowers keep falling on me! Can't you two do a better job to be careful with those, I mean really, I thought you were apprentices not kits."

Softpaw rolled her eyes and mewed, "sorry, Robinpelt. We're trying our best, you'll just have to put up with it."

"Why! If I ever spoke to an elder like that when I was an apprentice, my ears would have been clawed off."

"Forgive us, but we are truly doing our best here. You can move somewhere else meanwhile if it bothers you," Cherrypaw suggested.

"And get even more cold? No thanks." Hawkfire scoffed. *How in Silverpelt does a cat make him happy or least not scowl? Has he even smiled before? Probably not.*

Applepaw trotted over with more stems of honeysuckle and dumped them at their feet. "Here you are, I'll go fetch some more."

"Thanks, Applepaw!" Cherrypaw batted her eyelashes thankfully at him. Applepaw jutted out his chest.

"It's nothing." He swaggered away and Hawkfire purred. *He looks*

like a duck waddling around!

She shifted her attention over to Gentleleaf's kits. Pyrekit batted at a ball of moss, passing it to his brother, Onekit. Onekit's fur resembled his father's exactly, a spitting image. She smiled, reminiscing her time in the nursery and spending the day playing moss-ball. She kind of missed her kittenhood, when life was so simple, although she was still content now.

Lightningmask interrupted her thoughts, "hey." He yawned and padded over, nuzzling her cheek. Hawkfire felt her pelt burn hot with embarrassment as Snakefang shot her a smirk and raised his eyebrows. She shuffled away awkwardly, immediately feeling bad from the hurt in the warrior's eyes.

"Um, you should go help your apprentice. I think she's struggling," she mumbled.

"Well actually, I was planning to take Softpaw out to practice battle moves with Cherrypaw and Moonface and was wondering if you wanted to come," he meowed.

Hawkfire gave a small smile, "sure. I'd love to see how far she's gotten in the last few sunrises."

"You might want to lower your expectations," he teased.

"I suppose I should. You aren't that good after all."

"Hey! That's not what I meant, fuzz-brain." Hawkfire stuck out her tongue and laughed. Lightningmask gave a sly grin and called out to his apprentice.

"Softpaw! Would you like to train?"

The young she-cat groaned with relief. "Yes please! Can Cherrypaw come too?"

"I'm okay with that, just check with Moonface." She nodded and the two scurried off to find the black-and-white tom.

"You have such a lively apprentice, Lightningmask. You're so lucky,"

she murmured.

He chuckled, "yeah, I guess I am. Although it's a little strange to be teaching my friend's kit."

"Are you and Daisypelt close?" she meowed.

He cocked an eyebrow, "why? You jealous?"

She rolled her eyes, "ha, you're funny. No, I was just wondering."

"Oh," Lightningmask almost sounded disappointed. "We're friends I guess, but she and Moonface are closer."

"How could any cat *not* be friends with you," she gibed him and he thwacked her ear playfully. Softpaw and Cherrypaw returned with Moonface then who was trailing behind the hyper she-cats.

"We're ready," Cherrypaw grinned. The warriors exchanged amused glances and strode outside to the training arena. The leaf-fall air rustled her whiskers as Hawkfire walked beside Lightningmask, Softpaw staring at them curiously as he inched closer to her. She felt his fur prickle her own and she flicked her ear as she moved over. *I don't want Softpaw spreading any rumors. Next thing I'll know Morningstar will be yowling we're mates or something at the next Gathering. As if!* She snorted, *why can't my Clanmates mind their own business?*

The summer petals have curled brown to mother earth, soon to be hidden beneath a garland of scarlets and golds. Crisp, wrinkled leaves lay like a blanket on the forest floor. Startled birds shot from the empty branches like a bullet as twigs snapped and leaves crunched under their feet. The sun hung low in the sky, its rays shining through the last few hanging leaves, illuminating the auburn, yellow and orange veins that ran through them. The serenity of the woods soothed Hawkfire as they came to the training arena.

"We made it. Why don't you and Cherrypaw begin and show what you've learned so far?" Lightingmask instructed Softpaw who curled her claws excitedly and raced down, her sister right behind.

Hawkfire seated herself at the treeline and made room for Moonface.

"How do you like Cherrypaw?" she mewed.

"She's a nice cat," he purred. "She also loves to learn, although sometimes doesn't know when to keep her mouth shut." Hawkfire snickered.

"Why does that remind me of someone?" Moonface gave her a puzzled look.

"Who?"

"Oh, no one." An image of Runningmouth ran through her mind. *If he weren't from another Clan, we could have been great friends,* she sighed forlornly. *But Thistleclaw would shred my pelt if that ever happened. Loyalty first.*

Lightningmask came over and signaled the apprentices to start. Softpaw batted at her sister right away, Cherrypaw blocking her with her forepaws. Softpaw swiftly ducked down and gently bit Cherrypaw's leg. The she-cat crumpled to the ground and Softpaw let out a triumphant *mrrow.*

"Ha! I won! Did you see that, Lightningmask?"

The tom purred "very good. You did well." Hawkfire was about to comment when a revolting scent drifted through the air. Her fur bristled and she spun around. *No way, ShadowClan? What now?*

"Be quiet," she hissed to the others who stared at her with alarm. Hawkfire crept out of the hollow and stalked away towards the scent. She came upon a huge patrol of ShadowClan warriors sneaking through a patch of bramble tendrils. Pinestorm's coat snagged on a thorn and he hissed in annoyance.

"Frog-dung! I hate this! I don't get why-"

Toadpelt swished his dark tail, "stop whining like a spoiled kit! This will be our territory soon so get used to it. " The tabby scorned his Clanmate and plodded ahead in irritation.

Amberfeet growled, "Be quiet you two! Do you want all of ThunderClan to hear us? Remember, we need to chase them out swiftly so don't screw this up."

"Amberfeet's right," Inkstar meowed. "Hurry up, we can't be heard."

Hawkfire narrowed her eyes and slowly backed up. *Those fox-hearts! How dare they think for even one heartbeat they can claim my forest? ThunderClan isn't that pathetic.* She made her way back to the others who were in a state of panic.

"What's going on?" Lightningmask demanded.

"ShadowClan," she glowered. "They're trying to take over our territory by chasing us out."

"We won't let them get away, right?" Softpaw hissed.

"This is kinda scary," Cherrypaw mewed.

"Don't worry, we can handle them. Those fleabags will never belong here," Moonface spoke up. "You two, please go back to camp and warn Morningstar." Their eyes stretched wide. "Hurry!" he barked. They pelted away and Lightningmask sighed.

"Now what?"

Hawkfire clenched her jaw, tightening her muscles. "We'll follow the patrol in case. Come on." She steered them to the ShadowClan patrol which was drawing nearer and nearer to their camp. She thanked StarClan that their pelts weren't light-colored, or else they could have easily been seen against the brown and green foliage. Nonetheless, she tried to stay in the thickest cover as they stalked the ShadowClan warriors. Keeping low, she inched forward, her eyes never leaving the cats. A tap on her flank startled her but she remained still. Craning her neck, she saw Owlpelt motioning for them to follow. With one last glance she followed the brown she-cat. They met up with a patrol of ThunderClan cats and realized it was the first attack patrol. *Yes! I get to be on the front-lines.* She flexed her claws and lined up in the ranks.

Flareheart stepped in front of them, obviously the leader of them.

"Is everyone ready?" The ThunderClan warriors nodded and Hawkfire smirked. *I can't wait to show off my strength!*

"Remember, we will start behind the enemy. When I give the signal, jump in and land a few quick blows before backing back out. They will think we'll attack again from the same place but as soon as they let their guard down on the other side, Morningstar will lead the second patrol down. We'll repeat this until we drive out those mouse-hearts!" The band of warriors roared with fury before starting forward.

They moved quietly and Hawkfire made sure to step over twigs and bracken carefully as to not make a sound. They kept downwind as they crouched behind the patrol. She eyed Flareheart's ginger tail that was being held erect, waiting impatiently. Flareheart suddenly flicked her tail-tip and kinked it over her back. Hawkfire sprang out from the undergrowth and landed squarely on top of a tortoiseshell. *Maplepelt!* She easily recognized the distinctive dappled coat. *Even if we're allies in StarClan, right now we are enemies.* She bit into the she-cats ear, blood abruptly surfacing. Maplepelt snarled and glared at her attacker. Her eyes widened.

"You!" she seethed. "I won't be defeated by you again." She started bucking wildly so Hawkfire dug her claws in, remaining on top. Flareheart's yowl rung out and Hawkfire growled in frustration as Maplepelt sliced her ear. She darted away and swiftly retreated back into the undergrowth. The ShadowClan warriors clustered together and eyed the trees warily.

"Wh-where did they go?" Raggedflame stammered.

"Did we win?" Sandfur exchanged glances with Wildthorn.

"Ha! We did it! Those thundercats won't bother us again," Dustleap, a gray tom with blue eyes, meowed proudly.

"Don't be fooled by them, they are not that weak. But we are still clever and will claim these woods. Stay together and anticipate them!" Inkstar yowled. *Good luck with that,* Hawkfire thought complacently as the smell of fear drifted into her open mouth. *Words of encouragement can't save you now, trespassers!*

Her gaze flickered to the other side where Morningstar's patrol awaited. A flash of fur erupted and surprised the patrol. The intruders shrieked as the other attack group sent rapid blows at them before retreating once more. *Now it's our turn again.*

Hawkfire's patrol circled around to an opposite angle. They hunched behind a hickory tree whose ash gray bark was peeling in long strips, giving off a shaggy look. She paused and froze, until Flareheart motioned for them to strike. She threw herself at the nearest cat but they ducked away. The cat leaped towards her and she was shocked to see it was none other than Russetclaw. Take by surprise, she didn't have time to register the fact that he just crashed into her, knocking them both into a bush that concealed them. Her opponent was off her and she scrambled to her paws, spitting in rage.

"Why did you knock me out of the battle? Actually never mind, I don't care anymore. I'll just shred your pelt here where no one can see us to teach you a lesson for trying to claim ThunderClan's territory." She unsheathed her claws, her eyes gleaming.

"I don't want to fight," Russetclaw meowed, his voice quivering slightly. *Good, he's afraid.* The tom continued, "especially not against you, my friend. Let's just stay here and-"

"Watch our Clanmates get hurt and possibly die? No thanks. Besides, I don't think you should count me as a friend." She jeered on *friend* to emphasize her point. "I'm loyal to my Clan only and no one is going to change that."

Russetclaw flinched as if she struck him. "I understand how you feel, I don't wish to betray my Clan either. However, you're always haunting the back of my mind. It's becoming more and more difficult for me to focus on my tasks set by ShadowClan when I can only think about you. I've become drawn to you, Hawkfire." He circled her and she felt her pelt prickle with unease. Every part of Hawkfire's body screamed at her that she shouldn't be talking so idly with the ShadowClan warrior while her Clan was fighting, but she couldn't help herself. It was as if her feet were sucked in the ground, preventing her to move.

"Why?" she murmured. "Why are you so fascinated about me? Friends are only for Gatherings to try to steal information from. I cannot allow myself to be looked down upon as disloyal by my Clan. I have to become leader one day and you are not helping that. Why should I care for a ShadowClan warrior?"

Russetclaw regarded her for a moment. "I can't force you into anything you don't want. The only thing I ask is that you meet me at the lake tonight, okay?" Hawkfire stared at him. *What are you doing? You can't trust him, he's your foe. Get back to the heat of the battle!*

"Okay," she mumbled. "Just promise you won't do anything crafty." Russetclaw smiled in relief and gave a small nod. *I'm such a mouse-brain,* she thought as he dug a single claw down his shoulder to fake a wound. *Good thinking.* She felt a slight admiration towards him but pushed it away.

She threw herself at Russetclaw, pushing him out of the shrub. Hawkfire got up and looked down at the tom. "Do you give up?" she meowed.

"Yes," he spat with rage. "Yet you have not won the battle still." He shakily stood back up and limped away.

"Don't ever mess with ThunderClan again, Russetclaw!" Hawkfire called after the defeated warrior. Most of ShadowClan was now retreating she noticed as she looked around. Morningstar forced Amberfeet away who scattered away from the battle in utter failure.

"Don't even bother to pick fights you can't win in the future, Amberfeet. ThunderClan will always remain elite," Morningstar snarled. He turned to the massed ThunderClan warriors. "Is everyone alright?"

"Yeah," Cloudchaser muttered as he rolled his shoulder blades.

"What happened to you, Hawkfire?" Daisypelt sniffed her. "You suddenly disappeared in the fight."

Hawkfire shuffled her paws, "oh, I was just chasing out an intruder

that was sneaking away."

Daisypelt gave her a quizzical look but didn't say anymore. They headed home and were instantly welcomed by the anxious Clan.

"So?" Mosskit tumbled forward.

"We won," Sparrowclaw purred and licked the little kit's forehead. Duckfeather strode over and sighed.

"Great, more wounds to check. Okay, listen up! The ones with the most severe injuries line up by my den, the rest I'll come to later." Lavenderstripe hobbled to the cave, her one paw not touching the ground while Webfur followed behind, a large gash on his side. *I'm pretty fortunate. No, I'm just strong. It's up to me to protect these cats.*

By sundown, Fuzzypaw had trotted over to Hawkfire to tend to her cut. As she was applying some herbs to the nick in her ear, Hawkfire studied the medicine cat apprentice. Curiosity sparked inside her when she saw how she was working in a somber way.

"Is something bothering you, Dazedpaw?" Fuzzypaw froze for a heartbeat but then carried on.

"I don't think you're ready to know yet," she murmured. *Ready for what?* Fuzzypaw gazed at her with those stupid, big eyes. "Beware of the darkness, warrior. Evil will betray your heart and lead you astray." With a flick of her tail, the she-cat left her. Anger surged through her as the words started to sink in. *What in StarClan's name was she talking about? She doesn't know what she's saying, I mean I am training with* the *StarClan! They're the farthest from evil!*

Chapter 19

[image]

Hawkfire saw Russetclaw by the lake and cautiously approached. He smiled as she walked over, "glad to see you actually came."

"Whatever. Why am I here again?"

"I want to show you something." Hawkfire tilted her head as the ginger tabby tom got up and signaled for her to follow.

"This better be good," she muttered and plodded after him. They reached the ShadowClan border and she instantly shrunk back.

Russetclaw looked over his broad shoulder. "What's the matter?"

"I'm not going on your territory!" she spat with her eyes wide.

He smiled gently, "it's alright. I'll be beside you the whole time and all my Clanmates are asleep so no one will spot us." *As if that's going to comfort me.* Hawkfire struggled not to turn tail and flee as she stepped across into the pine trees. An image of Berrypelt crept into her mind and she shuddered as she continued through the unfamiliar forest. She was happy to fall behind Russetclaw, staying close enough to feel his tail-tip brush her cheek. Hawkfire's heart fluttered like a caught sparrow. *What's up with me now? Calm down.* Hawkfire could feel the immense darkness press around her and her throat tightened until the air seemed too thick to breathe. *StarClan will keep you safe,* she reminded herself.

Russetclaw's tail slid ahead and Hawkfire sped up, frightened of losing the feel of its soft tip on her nose. He must have sensed her unease because he whispered, "we're almost there." Cold air swirled around her, piercing her pelt. Steadying her breath, she focused on her paws instead when the distant echo of running water chimed suddenly. They emerged into a slender clearing where a ribbon of living turquoise boldly flowed amid the green of the forest. The river had a strength that was reflected in the trees. It flowed on

with confidence, taking the form of the river bed, billions of drops moving together. The community of trees stood tall all the while.

"We're here," Russetclaw murmured, a forlorn look in his glistening eyes. He sat down by the stream bed and breathed in deeply, motioning for her to join him. Hawkfire gazed into the running water that quenched the thirst of the mighty beings rooted to the rich soil, the current dragging needles along with it. She glanced over at the ShadowClan warrior who was smiling to himself and had his eyes closed.

"This place is pretty special to you, huh?"

"Isn't it just wonderful?" he mewed and opened his eyes. "This is my favorite spot to relax and just listen to the forest. I find it very soothing and peaceful."

"I can't argue with that," she meowed. The scenery was, indeed, breathtaking.

Russetclaw sighed, "no matter the chatter of the trees the stream is steady, welcoming, refreshing. On quiet days it can be heard to whisper its wisdom, on stormy days it is lost to all but those who listen closely. The river always talks, always speaks the wisdom of the water to anyone who treasures its musical words. Even on the rainiest of days it can be heard beneath the splashes, a sacred melody, always moving, always present. None of my other Clanmates know about this place's existence. I was always tempted to show them, but decided it's my little secret haven. I haven't shared it with anyone until now, Hawkfire." She gulped nervously as he set his intense stare on her.

"Uh, well thanks for showing it to me. It is very lovely."

"I'm glad you think so," he purred happily.

"Listen, it's getting really late so I should head back now. Do you mind leading the way?"

"Of course." They walked in silence until they reached the border. Russetclaw hummed to himself in thought.

"I'll make sure to cover up your scent, so don't worry about being caught."

"Thanks once more." She smiled and dipped her head.

"Can I see you again?"

Hawkfire hesitated and met his hopeful gaze. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt anyone. Just make sure you aren't seen by your Clanmates."

"I know, I know. Well, I'll see you tomorrow night at the lake. Goodnight, Hawkfire." The warrior turned and swiftly padded away, his pelt vanishing as he was swallowed up by the darkness of the pines. Hawkfire returned to her own camp, her mind troubled. *This isn't right, but yet, I don't want to stop meeting him. What is it about him that makes me so flustered!* She hissed in annoyance and snuck into her nest, careful not to disturb her sleeping Clanmates. She shut her eyes and felt tiredness wash over her instantly.

"Little one, what do you think you're doing?" Hawkfire spun around as Thistleclaw's gray fur faded in. He narrowed his yellow eyes at her in disgust as he snarled, "I told you to stop meeting that ShadowClan warrior. He is only softening you and making you grow weaker. You will stop meeting him or else."

She sniffed disdainfully, "or else what? Do not forget that you are a dead cat whose job is to train me, not lecture me."

"How dare you speak to your ancestor that way! I have no obligation to help you, I am doing all this out of pure will. You should be more thankful towards me, unless you don't want to be a leader anymore." Hawkfire dug her claws in the ground and flicked her tail, heading to the clearing to join the training session. She froze as a mottled chocolate tabby-and-white she-cat blocked her path.

"Hello, you must be the destined one." The stranger purred in a bitter tone, almost as if forced.

"What's it to you?" Hawkfire growled. Her claws were itching for a fight to take her mind off things, and she wasn't too picky on whom

to unleash them on.

"Oh, nothing much. I just wanted to see you for myself is all."

Just then, a gray she-cat with a dark gray stripe down her back and paws stepped out. "As if, I bet you're just jealous, Hollypine," she sneered.

Hollypine hissed at the other newcomer, "Quiet, Rainclaw! Like you're one to speak!"

"Oh come now, don't get in a hissy fit. It'll only makes things awkward." Hollypine huffed and glared at Hawkfire.

"I don't know what Thistleclaw sees in you."

"I can show you if you like," she replied calmly and sunk to the ground, her stomach brushing the cold dirt.

"Ha! I have no interest in fighting a inexperienced warrior!"

"Aww, don't be scared." Rainclaw mocked sympathy towards the she-cat which angered her even more.

"I just hate you!" she shrieked and stormed away. Rainclaw laughed to herself and turned back to Hawkfire.

"Hmm, so you're the destined cat. I'm curious to see what you can do."

Hawkfire blinked. "Is that an invitation?"

"Why? Do you need one?"

"Nope." She grinned and attacked the StarClan warrior, sinking her fangs into her leg. Rainclaw leaped back and made a neat twist in the air, taking Hawkfire by surprise when she rolled towards her and knocked her down. A grunt escaped her lips as Rainclaw raked her back with thorn-sharp claws. She flipped over to try and pin her down, but she wriggled free of her grasp and darted to her left to attack her from behind. Hawkfire was on the ground in an heartbeat, wincing as claws and teeth dug into her flesh. She bit

Rainclaw's scruff and raked her snout as best as she could. The she-cat yowled and fell back in a flurry. Hawkfire sprung to her paws as Rainclaw darted forward and sliced her ear. Blood tickled the inside of her ear as she shook her head. She narrowed her eyes and lunged once more, grabbing her by the shoulders and pushing her down, scraping her belly furiously. Rainclaw struggled underneath her and managed to wriggle free. The two cats faced each other with backs arched and fur fluffed out. Then, all of a sudden, Rainclaw sat down and began grooming herself. Hawkfire gave her a puzzled look, not sure if she was trying to get her guard down or not.

"I'll admit, you're not half bad," Rainclaw mused and gazed at her curiously. "You may just surpass me soon."

Hawkfire relaxed and started cleaning herself. "Thanks."

"What is your ambition?"

"I want to become leader," she meowed. "Not just of ThunderClan though, but of all the Clans! I won't stop until I become the strongest." Rainclaw didn't say anything, just stared at her in thought.

"Well, you should wake up. Don't want to miss any patrols right? It was nice to finally meet you, chosen one."

Hawkfire awoke in her nest, blood still trickling down her ear. She shifted her position, accidentally bumping into Rabbitclaw. Her brother groaned and opened his eyes.

"Hawkfire? What happened to your ear?" He sat up and sniffed her scratch. "What happened?"

"There must be a thorn in my nest," she lied. "I'll take it out later."

"You should get that checked out by Duckfeather. You don't want an infection," he fretted. She rolled her eyes but lifted herself from her warm nest and ducked outside. She strode to the medicine cat's den where Fuzzypaw was sorting through some herbs.

"You're up early," she commented as Hawkfire entered.

"Yeah well, same goes for you, Dazedpaw."

"I'm always up early," she purred. "What do you need?"

"I have another scratch I would like you to check," she mumbled. Fuzzypaw narrowed her eyes but only grabbed some herbs and started chewing them up. As she was applying the poultice to her ear, Hawkfire spotted Duckfeather's dark pelt hunched in the far corner of the den. She felt uncomfortable under his suspicious glare and focused her attention on her paws. She inspected her claws, wondering whether she should sharpen them when Fuzzypaw sighed.

"Done. You know, nearly every morning you have some sort of wound, you should be more careful when making your nest."

"Yeah, yeah." Hawkfire swept out of the den and watched hungrily as Softpaw and Cherrypaw fetched the last two pieces of fresh-kill for the queens and elders. *I'm so hungry. Why shouldn't I eat first? After all, it* is *the warriors who have to hunt to feed everyone. We should be the first to eat so we have more strength to protect everyone.* Hawkfire swished her tail and slunk over to the crowd surrounding Flareheart who was already organizing patrols.

"Moonface, lead a border patrol by WindClan's border. Take your apprentice and Hawkfire with you."

"Yes, Flareheart," he dipped his head and squeezed out of the crowd, Cherrypaw's head popping out of the nursery.

"Border patrol?"

"Yup." He led the way and Hawkfire ended up taking the rear. They trekked through the forest until they reached the border. Moonface started marking the trees and Hawkfire copied him, spraying a clump of heather. After a while she began fidgeting restlessly, wishing to just go back and eat a juicy morsel. *I hate border patrols! They're so boring. Why couldn't I have been picked for a hunting patrol? I need to sink my claws in something, anything!* She moaned in exasperation when a rustling in a bush behind her caught her attention.

A flash of brown fur shot out and she yowled on instinct, "mouse!" She was about to give chase but Cherrypaw beat her to it. The apprentice hared after the critter, crashing through the forest. Moonface turned around and his eyes widened in panic as Cherrypaw neared the border, the mouse still just out of her reach.

"Cherrypaw! Watch out for the border!" She must have not heard him because she ran straight across onto WindClan territory. *Uh, oh.* Hawkfire bit her tongue as a patrol of WindClan cats cut the apprentice off. She tried to brake but ended up crashing into a sleek black tom - Crowfall. The mouse was swiftly caught by Ashbreeze while a young brown tabby tom fluffed out his pelt.

Cherrypaw rubbed her nose with her paw, "ouch! What do you think you're doing on ThunderClan territory with my prey!"

"Actually, you're on *Wind*Clan territory trying to catch *our* prey, rabbit-brain," the young tom spat.

"Hollowpaw, please be quiet." Ashbreeze scolded him and turned back to Cherrypaw with a hint of wariness in her mew. "Why are you crossing onto our land, apprentice?"

Cherrypaw was dumbfounded and kept looking back and forth from the border to the cats in front of her.

Moonface nudged Hawkfire with his shoulder, "come on." They bounded over and the WindClan cats glared at them. Moonface bowed to them and meowed, "I am very sorry about this. You see, my apprentice over here was attempting to catch that mouse but accidentally crossed the border in the process. This was all a big mistake so-"

"So maybe you should teach your young to be more mindful in the future of where they put their paws. I thought ThunderClan could handle that at least," Crowfall snarled.

Hawkfire intervened, "what's that supposed to mean? ThunderClan is more than capable of training our young, and I don't think we need any help from a bunch of rabbit-chasers!"

Crowfall arched his back and hissed threateningly, "are you trying to pick a fight with me?" Hawkfire unsheathed her claws and felt the fur along her spine rise. Cherrypaw watched in awe but Moonface stepped between them.

"Let's not fight over a minor issue such as this. I am very sorry for the disturbance. We shall take our leave now." Ashbreeze flicked Crowfall's flank with her tail.

The black warrior sighed, "fine. Make sure you're more careful next time or we might not go so easy on you!" Hawkfire gritted her teeth and forced the fur along her back to lie flat.

"Will do," Moonface meowed and signaled for them to leave. They walked in silence until they were a safe distance from the WindClan patrol. Moonface spun around and glared at Hawkfire and Cherrypaw sternly. "What were you two thinking?"

"Me?" Hawkfire mewed in shock. "What did I do?"

"You were about to start a war between ThunderClan and WindClan!" he meowed. "You are a warrior now so please try to act more like it. Don't go around picking unnecessary fights." Hawkfire hung her head, sulking. *It's not like I would have lost or anything. Hold up, how come Moonface is ordering me around? He isn't much older than me!*

Moonface faced his apprentice next who was shrinking in her own pelt. "I expected more out of you, Cherrypaw. I even called out to you but you ignored me."

"B-b-but-"

"No buts, that was careless of you. Please be more careful next time, we don't need more trouble during the cold season." Cherrypaw stared down at her paws and Moonface dropped his tense shoulders. "I'll let it pass this time though." The she-cat brightened up and started for the camp.

Hawkfire called out after her, "where do you think you're going?"

Cherrypaw twisted her head around, "aren't we going back to

camp?"

"We haven't finished the border patrol yet." Cherrypaw groaned and trudged back over. Hawkfire twitched her whiskers, *I know how you feel.*

Moonface stretched, "let's hurry up so we can eat soon. I'm starving!"

"Same here," she mewed and went back to work, eager to finish so she could taste the warm tang of blood in her mouth again.

Chapter 20

[image]

Hawkfire grumbled to herself as she dug through her nest, checking for any thorns. Rabbitclaw had begged her to so she wouldn't hurt herself anymore, and she reluctantly agreed in the end. She knew that there were none, all her scratches were from training, but she couldn't let Rabbitclaw know that. She felt it would only complicate things.

She sighed and paused, *I wonder how Cedarbelly is doing?* The elder was forced to move into the medicine cat's den when he was struck with whitecough a few sunrises ago, and she had barely seen him since then. She remembered when Duckfeather had went to take him over.

"Cedarbelly, I need you to stay in the medicine cat's den for now so I can treat you more easily."

The old tom had blew out a gust of air, "I suppose I have no choice, huh?"

"Indeed," Duckfeather flicked his ear.

Robinpelt meowed hoarsly, "well get going won't ya? I don't need to get sick either." Hawkfire could tell that although he spoke roughly, worry was still evident in his eyes. She knew that Robinpelt would never admit it, but he was concerned for his denmate.

Hawkfire stretched and left the den, deciding to check on the elder out of curiosity. She froze at the entrance as a series of coughs erupted from inside. Perking her ears, she crept forward to see Cedarbelly's body spasming in his nest while Duckfeather hovered over him. She shrunk back a bit when Duckfeather looked up and spotted her.

"Don't come in now! Can't you see I'm busy? Get out!" he growled. Hawkfire hurriedly backed up only to collide with Fuzzypaw.

"Umph. Watch where you going, Dazedpaw!" she snarled and scrambled back up.

Fuzzypaw shook out her pelt and frowned, looking away. "My bad."

"So annoying," Hawkfire spat and was about to leave when Fuzzypaw flattened her ears.

"You know what, Hawkfire? I never did anything to hurt you and yet you treat me like crow-food, why is that? I'm getting so sick of it. You're...you're just...just a fox-heart!" The tiny she-cat was trembling with fury and Hawkfire stepped back in shock. She never knew Fuzzypaw could actually snap like that.

Fuzzypaw suddenly gasped, "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to say that, it's just that-"

Applepaw padded in at that moment, "Fuzzypaw, can we go now? I don't want to spend all sunhigh collecting herbs."

"Hmpf, this *fox-heart* is taking her leave now." She shoved past them and stormed outside, her tail whisking as Applepaw looked back and forth dumbfounded. Furious, she unsheathed her claws and clawed the dirt, tearing up small roots clinging to the soil. *Dazedpaw isn't helping with my destiny at all, how dare she say that to me! Sometimes I swear I want to...* Hawkfire took in a deep breath and exhaled slowly. *Calm down, she's still your Clanmate.*

The sun was beginning to melt behind the top of the trees, the clouds colliding in a backdrop of blue. She found Lightningmask sitting by himself by the warriors den and trotted to him. He looked up and smiled warmly.

"Hey, what brings you here?"

"My boredom," she mewed and slumped down onto the earth.

"I'm your fun when your bored?" he meowed with an eyebrow raised.

"I don't know, are you?" she taunted playfully and he rolled his eyes.

"Your sarcasm never wavers you know that?"

She laughed. "yeah, I know. But you just can't resist that part about me," she winked. He settled down beside her and began grooming her pelt as she rested in the last dripping rays of sunlight.

Mosskit was chasing Pyrekit and Onekit around the nursery. "ThunderClan will not allow ShadowClan on its territory!" The two tom-kits squealed and ran faster.

"Pyrekit, do something! She's gaining on us!"

"What am I supposed to do?" he cried.

"I don't, anything!" Pyrekit suddenly halted abruptly right as Mosskit sped around the corner. Her yellow eyes widened in surprise and she tried to brake, but wasn't fast enough. She crashed into the kit and the two tumbled down. Onekit fell back and plopped on the gray she-kit's back.

"Oomph," she hissed as Pyrekit joined in.

"Haha! We got her! Nice one, brother!"

"Thanks."

Mosskit struggled underneath them, making Hawkfire's whiskers twitch with amusement. "Get off me you fleabags!"

"Nope," Onekit grinned devilishly.

"You are now ShadowClan's prisoner," Pyrekit declared and flicked his tiny tail.

"I can't be beaten by two lousy kits!"

"And what are you then?" demanded Pyrekit. "You were still a kit the last time I checked."

"But at least I'll be an apprentice soon, she retorted. "You have moons and moons before you even start your training. I'll be a warrior by then."

"Nuh uh!" Onekit squeaked indignantly. "There are mice that would make better warriors than you."

"As if! Maybe if you get off me, I can show you some real battle moves rather than you're stunt."

"That wasn't a trick," Pyrekit meowed.

"Oh please, you were obviously cheating."

"How was that cheating? Besides you're not our mentor, I don't want to learn anything from the likes of you," Pyrekit snarled.

"Yeah, all you do is ruin our fun!" Onekit stuck his tongue out.

"Then why do you guys always invite me to play with you?" Mosskit growled.

"Whatever, let's go see if we can catch something in that bramble bush over there." Pyrekit slid of his denmate's back and started to trot away with his brother when Mosskit called out:

You couldn't catch a fly even if it was in your paws!"

"I wasn't talking to you, kittypet!"

Mosskit froze and glowered at the kit. "What did you just call me?"

Pyrekit's eyes were wide with fear but he didn't back down. "Kittypet!" he repeated.

"I am not a kittypet!" she roared. "My parents are Clanborn and so am I! You'll pay for that!" Mosskit's gaze darkened as she flexed her claws. Pyrekit braced in front of his brother, ready to defend them.

"Mosskit!" Hawkfire turned at the sound of Raindapple's voice. The queen was standing beside the large bramble thicket shielding the nursery hollow. Her silver dapple tail twitching in annoyance.

"Mosskit, if you can't play sensibly than you'd better come back inside. I will not have you starting any fights."

"But mom-"

"Nope. Come now, it's time for bed anyways."

Mosskit groaned and stomped to the nursery. "It's not fair. They started it," she muttered loud enough for Hawkfire to catch.

"Pyrekit! Onekit! You should come inside now too!"

"Aww, just a little longer, please?" Onekit begged.

Gentleleaf purred, "I'm sorry, my dear. Not tonight."

"Why should we have to go back too? We didn't do anything wrong."

Gentleleaf raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything apart from, "You can play as much as you like tomorrow. Right now we're going to sleep."

"But I don't feel like going to bed, its not even that late," Pyrekit whined.

"Don't argue with me, come along now." Pyrekit scuffed his paw in the dirt and reluctantly trailed after his mother with Onekit. Hawkfire chuckled to herself and she felt Lightningmask pause.

"What?"

"Oh, its nothing. Just the kits going at it again."

"They sure are energetic, huh?"

"Very," she purred. "Mosskit seems to be rather cocky though, that attitude will not help her in the future."

"I don't know about that, you managed to become a warrior after all," Lightningmask meowed.

She shot him a glare, "what are you saying?"

"Are you that mouse-brained that you can't figure it out?" She playfully scuffed his ear and he pushed her down.

"Hey! Get off me! You're as heavy as a badger, I can't breathe!"

"Apologize first," he grinned.

"Shouldn't you apologize?" she mewed.

"Nah, I think that it's your turn today."

"Then will you get off me?" she gasped as he leaned on her stomach more.

"We'll see," Lightningmask laughed. She frowned and turned her face away.

"Sorry," Hawkfire mumbled.

"What? I couldn't hear you, say it again please?"

She bit her lip, brought her mouth to his ear and shouted, "Sorry!" He fell back.

"Whoa, not so loud. You can make a cat go deaf with that, no lie," he rubbed his head. Lightningmask suddenly perked back up. "Wait! Maybe that's your secret weapon! Making cats go deaf with your tyrannical voice and temper!" Hawkfire couldn't hold back a laugh.

"That might just work," she panted, out of breath from her fit of laughter.

Lightningmask smiled and glanced back over at the nursery. "Anyways, Mosskit is a good kit still. She's a pretty awesome sister too."

"But not as awesome as me," Hawkfire winked earning a guffaw.

"But of course," he meowed. His eyes softened then, "you know what? Someday, I'd like my own kits to raise. A whole lot of them too."

Hawkfire tilted her head, "what brought this thought on?"

"Nothing much, just thinking."

"That's a first," she snorted.

He gave her a look and continued, "what about you? Do you want a family of your own?"

"I already have a family."

"You know what I mean."

She pondered it. Did she really want the responsibility of kits? What if it cost her her chance of becoming leader? She shuddered at the thought. No way would she let a bunch stupid kits ruin that. She'd let that part up to the other queens. "I guess not, I don't think I'd like that type of responsibility," she finally meowed.

Lightningmask lowered his gaze, "oh, okay." *Is that disappoint in his mew?* "Well, I'm going to go to the warriors den now to catch some winks before dawn patrol. See you tomorrow." He padded away, his tail tip scraping the ground. *What's up with him?* Hawkfire sighed and glanced at the sky that was beginning to darken. *I might as well go to sleep too, don't want to waste any precious time for training.* She headed for the den and curled up in her nest. A few moments later, more cats filed inside, her brothers pressed up against her, keeping her warm. She smiled happily and closed her eyes.

Another fit of coughs made Hawkfire flinch in her nest. Cedarbelly's coughs have kept her up nearly all night, and she couldn't stand it anymore. She moaned and turned in her nest.

"Can't sleep?"

She paused, "Rabbitclaw? You're awake too?"

She heard him sigh heavily, "I can't fall asleep with Cedarbelly hacking like that. It's way too noisy, even from the other end of the stone hollow."

She nodded, but realized it was too dark for him to see her. "Yeah. Want to go hunting?"

"It's better than lying awake here." Her brother got up, his brown pelt flashing in the moonlight that filtered through the cracks. They

crept past Lavenderstripe and ducked through the dirtplace. Snaking through the trees, they came to a stop at the Sky Oak.

"Let's hunt here," Rabbitclaw suggested and she nodded in agreement. She opened her mouth and tasted the air, the cool breeze sliding across her tongue. A faint scent of mouse made her turn to a holly bush behind her. She silently pointed her tail at it and the two crept towards it. As she got closer, she could clearly hear rustling from inside its branches. She stalked around it until she was directly behind the bush. Rabbitclaw positioned himself in front and held his breath, waiting for her. Hawkfire narrowed her eyes, spotting the mouse digging in the dirt and she pounced on top of it. The mouse squeaked in alarm and darted away, making her miss it by a pawstep.

The mouse burst out of the holly bush and right into Rabbitclaw's paws in its frantic escape, being killed swiftly by a bite to its delicate neck from her brother.

"Nice catch," she mewed.

"Thanks, you nearly had it there." Rabbitclaw poked the mouse thoughtfully. "So, how are you and Lightningmask getting along?"

She scrunched up her face, "fine I suppose." *Why is he asking me this all of a sudden?*

"Is it true that you, well, like him?"

"You mean as a friend?" Rabbitclaw hesitated and she instantly reeled back. "Hold up, do you mean you're thinking that...? No way, I mean, he's a really sweet guy, but I wouldn't say that I love him. Why did you want to know in the first place?"

"I was just wondering. You two have been hanging around each so much so I just figured that you were starting to fall in love or something," he mumbled.

"Does my relationships with other cats really concern you?" she snarled.

Rabbitclaw took a step back, "you're my sister. I only want to

protect you."

"I don't need protection, I'm perfectly capable of handling myself."

"I know that, but still."

She sighed and meowed, "it's fine. Just to clear things, I am not seeking any romance. Becoming a great warrior is far more important to me." *Yes, I need to focus on becoming leader, not love.*

Chapter 21

[image]

"Hawkfire! Hawkfire!"

As she crossed the quarry, Pyrekit and Onekit came tearing toward her. She hopped clear as they swarmed around her legs. "I can't play now," she told them briskly. "I have to see if there any patrols available."

Onekit pouted, "but you just woke up! It's okay if you miss one."

"It's not okay, it's my duty."

Pyrekit stared at her with round, pleading eyes. "Give us a badger ride, please?"

Onekit clung to her leg, "yeah, Tallwhisker says we're too big now."

Hawkfire felt a pang as she met the young cat's gaze. She hated disappointing them, and was always too soft on kits after her kittenhood. "Fine," she conceded, and crouched down. Before she had the time to protest, the two kits had scrambled onto her back. They clung to her fur with thorn-sharp claws and she winced slightly.

Hightail purred outside the elders' den. "Come and see this, Robinpelt. Hawkfire's bringing us some prey."

The dark ginger tom grunted, "Finally, I'm starving." He licked his chops, amusement sparkling in his eyes.

"You're not going to feed us to them, are you?" Onekit squeaked and wriggled on her back.

Hawkfire's whiskers twitched, "Of course I am. Don't you know? The elders love the taste of fresh kit."

"No! No!" Onekit squealed in horror. "I want to get down."

Stomping her paws like a badger, Hawkfire carried the kits toward the elders.

"You're just in time, I was starting to get hungry," Hightail meowed.

"No!" Pyrekit and Onekit cried in unison. Hawkfire felt the kits scrabble along her spine. Just then, Mosskit raced over and rammed into Hawkfire. She fell onto her side and groaned in exaggeration as the tiny she-cat attacked her.

"Get her!" she yowled and Pyrekit and Onekit joined in. Their tiny claws tickled her stomach until she couldn't take it anymore.

"Okay, okay! You guys win! Sheesh, I was only pulling your tail in the first place," she puffed and staggered back up.

"You're evil," Onekit pouted and hid behind his brother who was trying to act brave.

"I can't believe you actually thought she was going to feed us to the elders," Pyrekit giggled and his brother shot him a glare.

"You were scared too!"

"Was not!"

"Was too!"

"Was not!

"Was too!"

Hawkfire sighed, "break it up you two, don't fight." She glanced down at Mosskit who was scratching herself. *This kit is rather strong, I can see some future potential in her.*

Hightail broke into her thoughts, "do you know how Cedarbelly is doing? I haven't seen him lately." She shook her head remorsefully and he slumped his shoulders.

Robinpelt scowled, "that old tom is probably halfway to StarClan by now."

Hightail swung his head around and snarled, "don't you say that! He *will* live!" With that he spun around and stalked into the den. Robinpelt blinked in surprise, as did Hawkfire. *He must be really worried for Cedarbelly. They are close friends after all.* Hawkfire turned around and saw Lightningmask trot over to her just then.

"Hey," he mewed cheerfully. "Want to come play on the ice with us?"

"The lake is already frozen?"

"Yup, Cloudchaser just checked it this morning and he says it's completely covered in a thick sheet of ice."

Hawkfire twitched her tail-tip, "alright then." She met up with Softpaw, Cherrypaw, Applepaw and Ravenpelt. The other warrior was hunched over in a miserable expression and heaved a gust of air as they went over.

"Remind me why I have to go?"

"Because Moonface is on a patrol and won't be able to help watch over the apprentices, nor is anyone else," Lightningmask meowed matter-of-factually. Ravenpelt continued to mumble but Hawkfire payed no mind to him. She leaned over towards Lightningmask and shoved her snout in his ear.

"How did you ever survive with him as your mentor?" she whispered.

No clue," he whispered back.

"Can we go now?" Softpaw bounced on her toes impatiently. Her sister was sitting close to Applepaw with her tail wrapped around her paws neatly, only a slight quiver exposing her excitement.

"Yeah, let's go." Lightningmask led the way and Hawkfire padded beside Applepaw.

"Applepaw," she meowed.

"Yeah?" he skirted around a snowbank before coming back around.

"Aren't you nearly six moons old by now? Will you be made a warrior soon?"

"I hope so," he smiled at the thought. "I can't wait. I'm sick of Ravenpelt bossing me around." He glanced behind him to make sure his mentor didn't hear and continued. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but I miss Gentleleaf. She at least was nice to me, bothersome, but nice." Hawkfire purred at that.

"Have you visited her kits yet? They're so sweet."

"Yes, they are. In fact, I was showing them some neat moves from my training sessions." Applepaw attempted to swipe his forepaws in the air, but tripped on a root and sank into the snow. She snickered and grabbed his scruff, hauling him out. He spat out a mouthful of snow and licked his chest fur quickly.

"I tried that," he mumbled and she had to smother a burst of laughter with her tail.

"Obviously."

"Hey, come on slowpokes! You're falling behind!" Ravenpelt called over his shoulder and the two scurried over to the group that was several paces ahead. After a few heartbeats, they reached their destination.

The lake mirrored the heavy, grey sky on its frozen surface. Barren trees were oblique to the bold sun, a surge of wind picking up leftover ice particles and scattering them on her thick pelt. Icicles dangled from the shadowy skeletons of trees as well. It seemed as if time stopped and she was viewing a motionless world, no movement stirring around them apart from her visible breath billowing in the air. She inhaled deeply, taking in the sharp tang of leaf-bare. *Cold*, she thought and fluffed out her pelt.

Softpaw and Cherrypaw were gaping in awe at the scenery. "Everything's so still," Softpaw breathed.

"It's beautiful," Cherrypaw whispered in a mesmerized tone.

Hawkfire purred and shuffled a bit closer to Lightningmask,

exchanging warmth with him.

"Great, now that you saw it, can we go back home?" Ravenpelt growled and everyone glared at him.

"I got a better idea. Let's go play!" Lightningmask yowled and sped down to the lake, the apprentices eagerly following him.

"Make sure you test the ice again!" Hawkfire shouted after them and tumbled down the miniature slope. She gingerly placed a paw on the ice, leaning forward to increase the pressure, but nothing happened. Lightningmask was already further ahead and he tried turning around to get to her.

"Come on!" he yowled and she hopped on, relieved to find the ice firm beneath her paws.

"We could walk right over to RiverClan territory now if we wanted," she murmured. She looked back at Ravenpelt who was grooming himself by the shore. *I suppose we won't be able to get to him play with us, oh well.* She saw some slick, shiny stones near the black warrior and idea sparked inside her mind.

"Hey! I know what we can play!"

"What?" Lightningmask mewed.

"Let's play prey-stone."

Applepaw shook his head, "what's that?"

"It's some game that was made up by ShadowClan long ago, but has become quite popular among all the Clans."

"Never heard of it," Softpaw yawned.

"What's the rules?" Cherrypaw asked.

"The stones will be the prey, and all that ice between those two holly bushes will be substituted as the prey-hole," Hawkfire instructed and pointed her tail at the bushes. "That's the place where the stones will be safe. One team will try to put it in there to

win, while the other will attempt to stop them to win. If the other team catches the first, they'll swap places."

Everyone nodded their heads in understanding.

"Make sure you pass the stone to your teammate if your opponent blocks your path," she added.

"Okay, sounds simple enough," Lightningmask smiled.

"Where are the stones?" Applepaw meowed.

"I'll go get them." Hawkfire scrambled to the shore and sped past Ravenpelt who hardly glanced at her. She grabbed a stone in her mouth and raced back. She spat the small rock out on the lake and passed it to Lightningmask who caught it with an expert paw. Hawkfire ran across the gleaming whiteness, then flung herself and skidded, spinning on her belly across the ice to her Clanmates. Yowls of amusement followed her from where they stood watching. Even Ravenpelt was enjoying himself.

"How should we break up the teams?"

"How about, you three against Lightningmask and I?" suggested Hawkfire.

"Apprentices versus warriors? I'm in!" Softpaw squealed with delight and the three 'paws huddled in a group.

"Too bad Ravenpelt isn't playing, we could use his help," Lightningmask sighed.

"Oh, well. We'll win either way!" She watched as Cherrypaw fell back to guard the prey-hole. She quickly realized that it would be impossible to just slide the stone past them. Instead she turned and began batting the stone away from them.

"Keep up with me!" she called to Lightningmask. He scampered a few tail-lengths away from her and stayed level as she pushed the stone farther out on the lake. The ice was freezing under her pads, slightly dusted with snow, but wonderfully slippery.

As Hawkfire picked up speed, she stopped lifting her paws and let them skate over the surface instead. The wind rippled her fur and she felt as if she were flying. She let herself glide, then shoved the stone towards Lightningmask. He stopped it and spun around. "Let's attack!" he yowled.

Hawkfire turned and, while matching with her teammates speed, headed back to Applepaw and Softpaw. They were crouched on the ice, eyes narrowed on the stone, ready to lunge and stop it before it whisked past them.

"Here!" Lightningmask sent the stone back to her. Hawkfire caught it, not missing a step as she skated forward. She batted it back to Lightningmask. He was ready and parried it toward her. Applepaw and Softpaw looked from side to side, trying to follow the stone as it flicked between Hawkfire and Lightningmask faster and faster, all the while closing in on the prey-hole.

Hawkfire fixed her gaze on the gap between the two apprentices, and with an almighty shove, hurtled the stone across the ice. It whizzed toward the prey-hole, as straight and swift as a diving hawk. She slowed to a halt and watched it near the goal with excitement rising in her stomach. *We did it!*

"I've got it!" yelled Applepaw to his denmate and flung himself across the ice. He slid on his belly as quick as a snake, and stopped the stone dead with an outstretched paw. *Shoot!* She scuffed the ground as Lightningmask groaned.

"So close," he muttered.

Yowling in triumph, Applepaw hurled it back towards them. It zipped past Hawkfire, shooting toward the middle of the lake. Hawkfire turned, paws skidding, and gave chase to the stone as it whirled onward.

With a rush of satisfaction, she saw it slow down and slide to a stop. Dropping onto her belly, she glided to it.

Crack! The world split beneath her. Hawkfire gasped, terror gripping her chest as she felt the ice heave under her paws and tip

her into the icy water. She threw her paws up and tried to grasp the edge, but she didn't reach it in time and slid into the freezing depths with a shriek. The water instantly turned black, and dragged at her coat so cold, that it felt like claws were piercing her hide. Above her, the light faded as the water sucked her down. *Not again, StarClan help!*

Hawkfire began to churn with desperate paws, fighting to reach the surface. She blinked, focusing on which way the bubbles around her were drifting, then headed upward with a surge of hope. Her paws thudded against a solid wall.

No! She could see light beyond the expanse of whiteness and scrambled towards it desperately. This time, her claws ripped against the jagged underside of the ice. She saw movement above her, shadows over the ice. Faint yowls called out her name as the paws thundered above her. *I'm down here!* she thought and prayed that they could hear her struggling. Then the water began to pull her down again.

Too tired to fight against it, Hawkfire let her paws grow still and allowed the water to cradle her body. Her fur rose like seaweed upward, rippling in the currents. As the noise and chaos faded, she felt numbness spread throughout her body. Such quiet. Such calm.

Suddenly, the water began to churn. Flecks of ice and bubbles floated around her, and she saw silky black fur waft near her. *Lightningmask?* Had her Clanmate fallen in too? Claws tugged at Hawkfire's fur as Lightningmask grabbed a hold of her. He was trying to pull her up.

Through the darkening depths, Hawkfire could see Lightningmask's brown eyes that seemed to be pleading with her. She stared back. *It's hopeless,* she thought. *The ice has blocked us in.* Despite his flailing, they continued to drift downward.

Then Hawkfire saw another pair of eyes. There was a third cat in the water. The other cat grabbed her scruff and tugged together with Lightningmask to pull her up. They finally broke through the surface and she felt Lightningmask's claws unhook from her pelt. She was dropped on the ice and when she tried to breath, found

that she couldn't suck in any air at all. New panic aroused within her as her lungs screamed even more furiously than before.

She could still see though. Applepaw, Softpaw and Cherrypaw dashed over while meowing frantically, but her ears were too clogged with water to hear what they were saying. Lightningmask was moving his mouth at Ravenpelt who only furrowed his brow. Lightningmask glanced down at her and bit his lip. She hardly felt his paws pushing on her chest as her eyes were starting to roll into the back of her head. Suddenly, her mouth sprung open and she spewed out water. Coughing she shook her head to clear out her ears. They grew warm as the water poured out and her head fell back down.

"Hawkfire? Hawkfire, speak to me! Say something!" She flicked her eyes back to Lightningmask who was worriedly crouched over her.

"I'm alive," she croaked. He breathed a sigh of relief.

"Do you have a habit of nearly drowning?" he finally mewed in a shaky voice.

"Apparently." The cats surrounding her gave a timid laugh that died quickly. She inhaled deeply, relishing the cool air flowing back in her lungs. "Cold," she whispered hoarsely.

"Let's get you warmed up." Lightningmask ducked his head and started grooming her fur in the opposite direction. The others joined in and soon enough, feeling returned to her numb body. Pain shot through her as she struggled to get up, weary from her near drowning experience.

"Applepaw, run back to camp and tell Duckfeather to prepare for Hawkfire," Ravenpelt instructed his apprentice who shot off.

"Here lean on me," offered Lightningmask and she gratefully accepted. They trudged back to the ThunderClan camp slowly, Hawkfire trembling with cold all the while. When she entered the camp, her Clanmates instantly swarmed her.

"Are you okay?"

"What happened?"

"You poor thing." Hawkfire blocked out their concerns and shuffled towards the Medicine Cat's den. Duckfeather was waiting by the entrance and led them inside to a nest tucked against a wall. She sunk down on her knees and closed her eyes, her eyelids heavy boulders.

"What happened?" Duckfeather's gruff voice scratched at her ears.

"We were playing a game on the lake, when all of a sudden, we just saw Hawkfire disappear. We searched and I found a hole in the ice and dove in to rescue her."

"Hmm." She heard leaves rustling and then a soft, pungent smell wafting up her nostrils. "Eat these." Hawkfire lapped up the herbs without complaint and laid her head down on the spongy moss.

"Will she be okay?"

"Yeah, she just needs rest." Hawkfire didn't hear anything else because she had just drifted into a calm sleep.

Chapter 22

[image]

Hawkfire bent over sharply as if she were hit in the stomach, torrents of coughs erupting from her. She hacked and wheezed for what felt like ages until Duckfeather rushed over and pushed a wad of herbs under her nose.

"Hurry, swallow the catmint. It'll help with the coughing." She nodded appreciatively and lapped the delicious-smelling leaves up. Soon, her coughing died down to a vague throb in her throat. Duckfeather gave her some sodden moss as well, and she began licking up the water that was soaked inside it. She relaxed as the refreshing water soothed her throat, but shuddered at the thought of three sunrises ago. She recalled her lashing frenzy in the lake as she tried to escape the cold, dark depths, only to find a wall of ice blocking her way out. That feeling of helplessness still hadn't left her after all these days.

"Are you okay now?" Duckfeather's mew brought Hawkfire back to reality.

"Er, yes, thank you. I feel much better now." He grunted in response and left her. She shifted her position in the nest and laid her head down on her paws. Suddenly, a thought struck her. *Thistleclaw didn't visit me in my sleep. Does that mean anything? Nah, he must have known what happened and realizes how exhausted I am, so he is just letting me rest.* She stretched happily, relieved that she didn't have to wake up with any sore muscles or scratches. Though she wasn't sure that a coughing fit was that much better in comparison. After several minutes, Hawkfire became aware of the aching in her stomach and throat. *Ugh, I need to get better as soon as possible. Stupid whitecough.* She rolled onto her other side and steadied her breathing, but her dull pain wouldn't let her sleep. She continued to toss and turn but finally gave up, too uncomfortable to fall back asleep. Besides, Cedarbelly's wheezing snores next to her were flooding her ears.

Hawkfire turned over onto her back and stared at the gray ceiling. The waning moon's beams illuminated her fur and she instantly thought about her meetings with Russetclaw by the lake at night. *Is he wondering where I am right now? I hope he doesn't think I'm betraying him.* She frowned. *Wait, so what if he does? He's just a mouse-brained ShadowClan warrior anyways, it doesn't matter what he believes.* Yet, when she said that to herself, it stung her deeply for some reason, like a thorn piercing her heart.

She directed her thoughts away from the ShadowClan warrior, but another popped into her mind - Berrypelt. Hawkfire shivered at the thought of him. *Why am I thinking about him? I only killed him. So what that I killed a cat? He had it coming anyways. I suppose the worst part is, I kind of enjoyed it. Augh! Why can't I think of something normal, or at least no one from ShadowClan!*

She slowed her breathing back down and searched for something in the cave to occupy her with. After a frew heartbeats, she made out a small body silhouetted against the moonlight, and discerned it as Fuzzypaw. An abrupt surge of anger swept through her upon seeing her. *That she-cat doesn't know her place, she has no right to meddle in the affairs of a warrior!* Hawkfire sulked as she glared at Fuzzypaw from her nest. *She certainly isn't helping with my destiny either. What if she were to die mysteriously in her sleep one night...* Hawkfire stiffened at that thought. *What am I thinking? She's still my Clanmate and medicine cat, I can't kill her! Though can I really say she's an ally? Ahh, that's it, I have to stop thinking!*

By sunup, Hawkfire was exhausted. She hadn't been able to fall back asleep all night. Being stuck in camp since the accident had made her feel more tired, not rested. Just as her eyelids were drooping and mind at ease, Lightningmask barged in.

"Hawkfire! How are you? Are you feeling better?"

She gasped at his unexpected entrance and broke down into coughs. When she caught her breath, she growled, "I was into you came storming in here like a badger."

He hung his head. "Sorry," he apologized sincerely and she sighed.

"It's fine. Thanks for visiting me anyways, it's been quite lonesome around here."

His throat vibrated as a purr welled up, "of course. It's my pleasure to make my poor, sick friend happy."

"I'm not sick," she pouted.

"Certainly," he chuckled heartily.

"Have I missed anything lately?" she meowed.

"Nah, nothing's up much. Although, your playmates are wondering what happened to you."

"My playmates?" she echoed dumbfounded. "Do you mean Rabbitclaw and Snakefang?"

"I mean Pyrekit, Onekit and Mosskit. They've been causing all sorts of trouble searching for you since they don't believe the 'Great Hawkfire' could ever be sick."

She snorted. "Is that what they're calling me?" *They aren't far from the truth actually.*

Lightningmask smiled, "those kits really care for you. You have a way with them."

"Not really, they're a bother anyway."

"Careful that they don't hear you," he mewed quietly.

She rolled her eyes at him. "I'm more worried that they'd here you gossiping about them, you're too loud."

"I was almost whispering," he meowed.

"Oh yeah," she drawled. "I would totally call that whispering too. You know what, sometimes I wonder where you brain goes, it never seems to be in your head."

"Hey!" he sniffed and tossed his head back. "I am your senior, you

should show more respect."

"You are getting pretty old, I suppose I should act a little nicer to an elder," Hawkfire sneered.

"You're so mean, even more so than usual. I think your sickness is getting to you," he huffed, then perked his ears. "But seriously, how are you feeling?"

"I'm good, just bored lying around all day. I can't wait to leave."

"I miss you on patrols, you're company is always fun," he grinned.

"Aww, so sweet," Hawkfire purred and put her head down.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes."

"Positive?" he inquired further.

She groaned, "oh for StarClan's sake! Honestly, you're such a mouse-brain sometimes, I'll be okay. You should stop fussing over me, you're beginning to act like a queen."

"Sorry," he mumbled. Just then, Fuzzypaw came in and gave Hawkfire some herbs.

"Here, take these." Hawkfire obliged to her demand and swallowed them quickly. Her pelt grew warm when she realized Lightningmask was watching her the whole time.

She licked her lips and returned his stare. "Yes?"

He jumped in surprise. "Oh, er n-nothing. I, um, I'll be going now, so yeah. Have fun! Wait, that isn't right. Being sick can't be fun, so, get well soon!" He hurriedly exited and Hawkfire giggled. She could never tire of her silly friend.

Fuzzypaw blinked, "what was that all about?"

"Oh, he's just strange. Probably dropped on his head a few times as

a kit which would explain a lot. Don't worry though, you get used to him." That made Fuzzypaw laugh as she walked away to the back of the den.

Hawkfire started resting her head down again, when her brothers padded in.

"Hey, Hawkfire," Rabbitclaw purred. "How are you."

"Tired," she muttered. *Why can't I just get some sleep? Must the entire Clan disturb me first?*

Snakefang yawned, "I can't believe you're stuck here. It must suck, especially being near Duckfeather all the time."

"It could be worse," her tail whipped the moss.

"I suppose." Snakefang flexed his claws. "No one's allowed on the lake still after your incident, Morningstar doesn't want to risk any cats getting hurt."

Hawkfire narrowed her eyes in suspicion, "are you blaming me?"

Sadness flashed through his eyes, "of course not. I was just letting you know. Besides, I think it's for the better, I don't want to see anything like that happen ever again."

"Oh, nevermind then." She felt bad for accusing her brother but couldn't help herself. *Why am I acting so distrustful towards my Clanmates all of a sudden?*

"How about we let you rest? It seems like you need it," Rabbitclaw intervened thankfully as the tension built, and her brothers took their leave with a curt goodbye. *Finally.* She gladly closed her tired eyes and felt the gentle tug of sleep.

"Hawkfire?" Duckfeather leaned over her. "Swallow these leaves." A pungent scent wafted beneath her nose. Numbly she lapped up the green specks beside her mouth.

"Bring more feverfew, Fuzzypaw," Duckfeather called. Paw steps

pattered closer and a small bush with flowers like daisies hanging on it landed beside Duckfeather, who nipped off a few leaves. Hawkfire screwed her eyes shut, fatigued from her pounding headache.

"Is she okay?" Hawkfire recognized Fuzzypaw's mew, but she was too nauseous to open her eyes.

"She'll be fine."

"The pus excreting from her eyes died down," Fuzzypaw remarked.

"Yes, that's a good sign that her greencough might be dying down. Go and soak moss in the spring," he told Fuzzypaw. The medicine cat's mew faded into buzzing, and darkness swallowed Hawkfire. Duckfeather poked her sharply. "Stay awake. You've been in pretty bad shape. You can sleep later."

She lapped up another tongueful of shredded leaves and began chewing. Her thoughts began to clear a little. By the time Fuzzypaw returned with soaked moss, she was able to turn and watch.

"Thanks," she rasped and drank some of the water.

"Your welcome," Fuzzypaw meowed. "Do you want some food? You haven't eaten all day and you need strength."

Hawkfire shook her head, "no thanks, maybe later." Fuzzypaw nodded and left, settling down beside Cherrypaw and Applepaw, but her gaze kept flashing anxiously toward Hawkfire as she shared tongues with her Clanmates.

Applepaw's voice carried on the breeze. "How's Hawkfire and Cedarbelly?"

"Well, Hawkfire's greencough is starting to go away, but Cedarbelly is still pretty bad. Unfortunately, Duckfeather says they aren't allowed any more visitors."

"I feel so terrible, we shouldn't have gone to play on the ice," Cherrypaw murmured.

"It wasn't your fault," Applepaw insisted.

"Maybe."

She's blaming herself for this? Am I so weak that other cats have to take the blame for me? I thought I was stronger than this. Hawkfire sighed heavily. *I wish I could just go back and help my Clan again, it's so boring without any duties and I feel so useless.*

Flareheart's yowl echoed off the walls of the cave outside as she organized patrols. For some reason, hearing her former mentor give out orders to the ThunderClan cats made her grow bitter, disappointed that she couldn't go on one. *They don't really need me do they? Life in ThunderClan will continue to progress with or without me, it wouldn't matter if I died. They would mourn for a little and then I'd be all but a memory. Is that it?* Hawkfire tried to shake the nagging thought away. *No, that's not true. I am the destined cat to unite and lead the four Clans, of course I'll be needed!* She reminded herself. *They'll never forget me.*

Hawkfire busied herself with watching Cedarbelly. She noticed that the elder had grown scrawny in the past few sunrises, and that his light brown pelt was ragged and unkempt. His sneezing and wheezing had also grown more intense. *Do I look like that?* she wondered to herself. Hawkfire, suddenly feeling self-conscious, began furiously grooming her fur. She didn't stop until her pelt was lying perfectly flat and not a speck of dust was on it, a hairball tickling her throat.

She gulped it down and meowed shrilly, "Dazedpaw! Get me some fresh-kill!" After several heartbeats, Fuzzypaw padded inside with a small squirrel.

"This was all that was left," she murmured when she saw the look of disgust on Hawkfire's face.

"Ugh, whatever. It'll suffice." She bit into it hungrily, trying to not make faces as she chewed on the stiff, cold meat. It felt like leather slipping down down her throat when she would swallow a piece. She finally finished it after a while and rested her muzzle on the soft feather lining of her nest, drifting off into an uncomfortable

sleep.

Chapter 23

[image]

A faint glimmer of light broke through the curtain of bramble and splattered on the frozen, gray floor. A cold breeze blew in, sending a chill down Hawkfire's spine. She shivered and curled up tighter in the nest, but the draft was relentless. She finally gave up and rolled out of her nest.

The past few sunrises had been wonderful for her. Her greencough had faded away to a subtle hack and sniffle here and there, and Duckfeather said that she would be able to go back out shortly.

She stretched contentedly and yawned. *I can't wait to get back to my duties!* She wondered if her Clanmates missed her at all after so long of her being cooped up in the medicine cat's den.

Without warning, Hawkfire tripped over a rock as she was about to journey to the fresh-kill pile and tumbled down, her claw snagging Cedarbelly's tail by accident. The elder jolted awake and swung his head around wildly.

"What's going on? Are we under attack?" he wheezed heavily.

"Ah, my apologies, Cedarbelly. I tripped and caught your tail by accident." Hawkfire ducked her head in embarrassment.

Cedarbelly only purred, "It's quite alright, young'n. Why, when I was about your age, I was the biggest klutz the Clans had ever seen!"

Hawkfire giggled. "That's hard to picture."

"Nah. In fact, I once caught my foot on a leaf and fell down from the top of the cliffs of the camp! A leaf! I thankfully didn't break anything, but Meadowstalker lectured and nagged me for weeks afterwards until I thought my ears would fall off." Cedarbelly sighed

wistfully. "She constantly worried over me like a queen would for her kits. She was a great friend and I miss her dearly. Though I suppose it won't be long before I join her, eh?" He winked at her.

"You shouldn't say that, Cedarbelly. Don't you want to live?"

The brown tom meowed roughly, "I don't really care anymore. I have lived a good life in ThunderClan and helped the next generation as much as possible. There isn't anymore I can do. Besides-" He suddenly broke off into choking coughs and struggled to catch his breath. Hawkfire shrunk back a bit as he finally regained his breath.

"A-are you okay?"

"Oh yes, I'll be fine. Anyways, as I was saying, no matter what happens, either way I'll live."

Hawkfire knitted her eyebrows, "excuse me, but I don't think that's right."

Cedarbelly chuckled to himself, "so young, so naive. What I mean is that, even if I die, I won't truly be dead. Instead, my spirit will join my ancestors in StarClan where I will live for eternity."

"But you won't be living, you'll still be dead!" she continued to argue in frustration.

Cedarbelly shook his head, "listen well, Hawkfire. The only cats who truly die, are the evil ones. This is because their hearts have been blackened with hate and jealousy, their souls faded to an ugly stain. Those cats will spend the rest of time in a dark, terrible place, fated to walk alone forever in solitude. Those few evil ones will try to corrupt us down here out of bitter feelings to exact revenge or just make us feel miserable, so you must remain strong."

"I *am* strong," she grunted.

"Not just in body, but in spirit as well," he smiled.

What does he mean by that? Perhaps his sickness is making him go mad? Poor fellow. An awkward moment of silence stretched between

them until Hawkfire couldn't stand it anymore. "You must not be feeling well, why don't you lay down?" she blurted out.

He closed his eyes and sighed, "it seems all I ever do now is sleep. Well, thanks for listening to me blabber on, young'n." She gave a small nod and watched him climb back into his nest slowly.

Once Cedarbelly was fast asleep, she crept away but was stopped by a grumpy Duckfeather. He bent his head down and shoved his snout forward, his rank breath tickling her whiskers. "And where do you think *you're* going?"

"I was only going to get some prey," she mewed warily. *I don't need this now!*

"No way," he growled. "You're just starting to recover so I need you to take it easy as to fully recuperate."

"I've been taking it easy forever now! I want to leave, I feel good enough."

"Don't question me," he snapped. "I am still your medicine cat and you will listen to what I tell you."

"You don't get to boss me around! Only my leader has that privilege," Hawkfire snarled back.

"I would hardly call it a privilege. Now get back in your nest and I will retrieve a piece of prey for you."

"Ugh, forget it. I lost my appetite." She scowled to herself as she slunk over to the moss bed and sat down with a huff. *Who does he think he is acting all high and mighty? He didn't become leader over night last time I checked! That mangy, old flea-bag.*

Aware of her ruffled fur, she began to rasp it with her tongue to calm her nerves. At last, she was able to collect herself and relax. Duckfeather came back over with a few herbs, causing Hawkfire to wince at the familiar odor. She had grown sick of the same herbs every day and wasn't sure if she could stand for it much longer.

"Make sure you eat them all. If you keep this up, you'll be out of

here in less than a quarter-moon," Duckfeather meowed. Reluctantly, she lapped up the leaves and had to force them down without spitting them out.

"A quarter-moon? That's way too long still. Can't I leave sooner, like now?" she complained.

Duckfeather contradicted her with a grunt, "sure, you can leave. At least if you want to endanger the lives of your Clanmates by potentially getting them sick as well." Hawkfire opened her mouth but choose to keep quiet and stop arguing, knowing it was pointless. Instead she changed the topic.

"How is Cedarbelly doing?"

Duckfeather hesitated, "he's doing fairly well, but is still showing visible signs of greencough."

Hawkfire snorted and thought to herself, *well obviously. Even a mouse could figure that out!*

The medicine cat sighed and stalked away as Fuzzypaw padded inside, a fresh wad of cobwebs sticking to her pelt and in her claws. Hawkfire snickered but Fuzzypaw only flicked her ear. As she was putting the web away, Duckfeather hissed at her and ushered her to a separate corner. Curiosity sparked inside her and she strained her ears to hear the medicine cat business.

"How is Hawkfire?" Fuzzypaw mewed frantically.

"She's fine. Good thing she's a strong cat, she is fighting off her sickness with ease. It'll pass soon." Duckfeather shut his eyes. "I'm more worried about Cedarbelly though. He has barely woken up and when he does, doesn't even eat much apart from a few morsels here and there. He is growing weaker and I fear his old age is catching up to him."

Hawkfire could see Fuzzypaw gasp. "Wait! You don't mean that-"

"I'm afraid so," he cut her off. "There is nothing more we can do for him than keep him comfortable. He's in StarClan's paws now."

Author's Note:

I want to apologize for the short chapter, but the next one is the last and I felt it would be appropriate to stop here for now. I hope you have been enjoying it so far, so get ready for the final chapter! Also, this is a little late but please don't be a silent reader. Make sure to comment and vote or leave hate messages, something at least! I am only a beginner but am looking for any sort of feedback on how I'm doing , and if there are mistakes you'd like to point out to make my stories better , go right ahead . Thank you, guys! Love you all! <3

Chapter 24

[image]

Clumps of wet flakes drifted mindlessly down. Breath pale against the numbing air, she blinked dismally as the frost patiently kissed her face, hindered by the soft, dusty illusions of light that sat heavy on her eyelashes. It was gentle and lush, a powdery substance that made her skin feel raw in the bitter air.

Hawkfire blew a gust of breath and watched it snake upwards, coiling around the snowflakes. The sorrowful silence in the camp was thick as if it were a sodden blanket. Cedarbelly's stiff body was lying in the center of the stone hollow, snow sticking to his neatly washed pelt. The elders had helped Duckfeather and Fuzzypaw prepare him very carefully, their movements delicate as they cleaned their old friend. Now he looked fresh and revived nearly, his light brown glistening and speckled with white. Though his cleanliness could not fool any cat with a brain, he was still dead.

Hightail was the first to go over and say his final goodbye. His eyes were clouded with grief as he laid his snout on Cedarbelly's head. He murmured something and stepped back to let the next cat go. As cats went up one by one, Hawkfire felt fur brush against her. She looked up to see Duckfeather standing next to her.

"Would you like to say goodbye as well?" he whispered. She paused, and finally gave a timid nod. He led her to the elder's body as she stumbled to his side. Hawkfire respectfully pressed her nose into his cold fur, letting the sweet tang of the herbs wrap around her. An immediate pang of regret and guilt struck her as she was reminded of her mother. She had never done this for her, she had never said goodbye to Sorrelbreeze. Hawkfire got up and retreated back to the medicine cat's den hurriedly, wanting to escape the perfume of death threatening to suffocate her. She screwed her eyes shut, *I'm sorry, mother.*

Hawkfire watched as all her Clanmates that were lined up share-tongues one last time, until Robinpelt was the last one to go.

Everyone held their breath as Duckfeather aided him in walking over to Cedarbelly. Robinpelt hobbled slowly, and finally crumpled down beside his former denmate.

She heard him rasp, "I'm sorry, my dear friend, that you suffered so long from that illness. May StarClan be good to you and let no more pain or harm reach you." He buried his nose into his friend's fur and let a tear trickle down his face. Was it because he was that sad over the loss of Cedarbelly, or just since the temperature was freezing that a tear escaped him, Hawkfire wasn't sure. It was rather hard to imagine the dark ginger tom having a heart that let other cats in, but she wasn't going to question it.

At last, Robinpelt, Hightail, Morningstar and Brighteyes curled up by Cedarbelly's body to sleep by his side for the rest of the night. Robinpelt's one ear was laid flat against him broad head as he snuggled by Cedarbelly for one last time. She felt sad for the old cat, understanding his grief.

Then, out of nowhere, Fuzzypaw sat beside Hawkfire who gave her a brief glance before turning back to the Clan.

The medicine cat apprentice whispered softly in an anguished mew. "Cedarbelly is in a better place now, and is probably watching over us now as the young, noble warrior he once was." She lifted her head to the darkened sky, "he was certainly a respectable cat who died peacefully. He is a wonderful role model for all of us, and we should all try to be more like him."

Hawkfire sighed and growled, "that's great, but I don't want to be like him."

"Why not?" Fuzzypaw tilted her head.

"Cedarbelly was a fine cat, but so what? He was born a kit raised by loving parents before becoming an apprentice. He did duties to help the Clan and was taught all the lessons he needed to know to become a warrior. He earned his new title and blended in with all the other warriors; fighting, patrolling, hunting and just living the same, simple life in ThunderClan. Tell me, is that all to our existence? Just following the same exact routine hundreds of cats

before us did? I refuse to accept that, I want something more! I'll do something special so everyone remembers me, that I didn't just follow the path set before me but viewed a broader horizon!" Hawkfire was panting now, fury and ambition glowing in her forest green eyes.

Fuzzypaw shook her head slowly and gazed at the stars. "But what will they remember you for?" she whispered. She turned her stare to Hawkfire who froze, then snarled and went inside the cave. She flopped down on her nest while thinking angrily about her previous conversation with the apprentice. *They'll remember me as a powerful, leader who saved the Clans by doing the impossible. That's what they will remember me for, Dazedpaw!* She rested her head on the edge of the moss nest and after a little while, fell asleep.

Hawkfire instantly awoke in StarClan, but she could tell right away it wasn't going to be a normal night of training. Circling around her were Thistleclaw, Mudfang, Nettleclaw, Hollypine, Rainclaw and Redwillow. Their pelts were dark beneath the trees, their silent eyes glowing dimly as they continued to stare at her, their expressions unreadable.

"What's going on here?" she demanded but the only response was their mute glares. Her pelt prickled with unease as they parted in one motion, eerily in unison and another cat stalked out of the defiled, twisted trunks. Hawkfire immediately recognized the mangy, red pelt and sucked in a deep breath - Berrypelt.

The deceased ShadowClan warrior hovered over her, a smirk plastered to his lips as she asked in a small voice, "W-what are y-you doing in StarClan?" *How come Berrypelt is here, this doesn't make any sense. He murdered my family and even tried to kill me, so shouldn't he reside in the Dark Forest? What is going on?*

Berrypelt sneered at her and meowed as if reading her thoughts, "you're as gullible as ever, aren't you, Hawkfire? This is my home, the place where I truly belong." She gulped as he slitted his eyes and continued. "This is where you belong too, the Place of No Stars." He swept his tail around them to gesture the gloomy forest.

Hawkfire straightened up to her full height and mewed with

authority, "that isn't possible. Thistleclaw has been training me to unite the four Clans."

"Well, that is true," Berrypelt agreed. "But he himself is a Dark Forest spirit trying to shape you into one of us. You should be thankful for that."

Hawkfire gaped and turned to her mentor. "Is that true?" she whispered, praying to StarClan that he would deny it, but he only gave a very small, seldom nod. *No! This can't be!* She felt her fur bristle, furious that he lied to her and that she actually trusted him.

Thistleclaw stepped forward and meowed calmly, "Oh sweet little one, you are so innocent aren't you? It isn't my fault that you believed the lies I fed you, besides, it's all in your favor. I told you didn't I? Everything I do is in your best interest, like disposing of your weak parents for one."

Hawkfire gasped, "b-but Berrypelt was the one who killed them. I saw him murder Fallengaze in front of my own eyes and even found his fur snagged in Sorrelbreeze's claws!"

Thistleclaw purred, a malicious grin creeping up on his face. "But why do you think he did so? He didn't target Fallengaze and Sorrelbreeze just for fun, there was a motive, and I was it." Thistleclaw took another menacing step forward. "I ordered him to kill your parents since I couldn't do so myself, that way you wouldn't have any weak influences to make your intent waver. In exchange, I promised that he would have a spot here just for him, among all the truly strong warriors to train and grow better."

Hawkfire's mind swam with confusion and betrayal. "How could you?" she finally managed to choke out.

Her former mentor chuckled, "come now, little one. Join us once and for all and I promise that all the power you desire will come to you." She began to back up in fright, wishing to run far away from that evil place, but Berrypelt blocked her path.

The mangy, reddish tom growled, "it's too late to turn back now. If you want to leave, you'll have to defeat me again. But I'm warning

you, I'm not the same cat I once was."

Hawkfire took a shaky breath and replied, "I'm not either." The two cats suddenly attacked each other, throwing vicious blows. Berrypelt scratched her forehead with his outstretched claws but she pushed back. Blood pounded in Hawkfire's ears and the red sticky substance dripped over her nose from the cut on her forehead, however she did not loosen her grasp on her opponent. If she lost even the slightest bit of grip, it would be the end of her. The two cats were caught in a deadly game of tug-of-war, each trying to gain the upper hand over the other as they struggled, bit, clawed and snarled at each other. Just as she raised her claws to swipe at Berrypelt's throat, he sprang away from her, having used that fraction of a second that she had let go to his advantage. Hawkfire stumbled, her open claws tearing the dirt while she stared at the tom, panting through clenched teeth as the two once again began to circle each other, waiting for the other one to make the slightest movement in their direction.

Hawkfire was enraged at everything happening all at once and she felt her mind ache as the odd voice entered her brain again, but this time, she allowed it to consume her as she was too focused on the battle at hand to bother with it. Red tainted her vision's edge and she could feel her conscious slipping away as the new being took her place. Berrypelt swatted at her ears but she twisted in time to bite his front paw before receiving a slash across her cheek. Hawkfire smiled cruelly and lunged forward, sliding beneath Berrypelt's exposed belly skin and sliced it with her claws, then jumped back. He shrieked with fury and crushed her under his heavy paws, biting down on her neck hard. She nipped his ear in an attempt to rid him of her, but he stayed put. Blood was blinding her vision as she helplessly flailed and screeched, until finally, she threw him off with one massive shove. Berrypelt tumbled backwards into the trees as Hawkfire shakily stood back up.

"You're dead," she hissed with her ears flattened against her skull. Hawkfire pounced on top of him and dug her talons deep into his flesh. He immediately tried to forcefully kick her off with his hind legs, but she held on tight and ripped his flank with her back claws. She grinned as his cuts oozed with blood, the thick substance

running down his side. Berrypelt's eyes formed an angry glare as Hawkfire towered over him with triumph flaring in her cold eyes.

"It's all over," she crooned. Berrypelt's eyes stretched with wide with fear as she pressed her claws to his throat. "I'll make you suffer like I did," she whispered in his ear and pushed down harder, his choking gasp filling her with pleasure. After several more heartbeats, Hawkfire grew bored and bore her claws all the way into his throat, his trachea catching on them. The horror that struck in his eyes earlier began to fade as the life left his maimed body, blood pooling from his deep wound. Hawkfire watched in delight as his spirit started to evaporate, and pricked her ears while waiting patiently until his yellow eyes remained glassy and lifeless.

When there was nothing left of Berrypelt, she could hear Thistleclaw's voice drift around her. "The curse is complete. Welcome, Hawkfire, the chosen one."

Hawkfire jolted awake, safely back in her own nest panting heavily for breath, and cringed at the sight of her battered pelt. She hurriedly tried to fix it before anyone saw her, but Fuzzypaw trotted in at that moment to see what was the matter. The black-and-white she-cat gasped, shocked at the sight, her jaw hanging loosely. Hawkfire was at a loss of words to explain it, but Fuzzypaw just left and fetched herbs. The apprentice began to clean her quietly and lap herbs into her wounds. Hawkfire winced at the pain but held still. Fuzzypaw continued to press the herbs more firmly into her injury, the affliction jerking her into wakefulness.

When Fuzzypaw had finished, she stood up abruptly and stared at Hawkfire with remorseful eyes. "I know what you're doing. You must be careful and let StarClan guide your paws to the right path." With that, Fuzzypaw left her alone once more. *It's too late for that,* Hawkfire thought to herself reluctantly.

Author's Note

Thank you guys so much for reading my story! I had a lot of fun working on it (even though it took longer than I thought it would), and I hope you enjoyed it too. I will be working on the sequel shortly, but I'm still not completely sure when. School is hard to work around with all my projects like Science Fair, so I appreciate all the support from you. Thanks again and I'll see you in the next book! ;)

~KittyyMelodyy